

PRIMITIVE WAR II

ANIMUS INFERNAL

ETHAN PETTUS

Animus Infernal

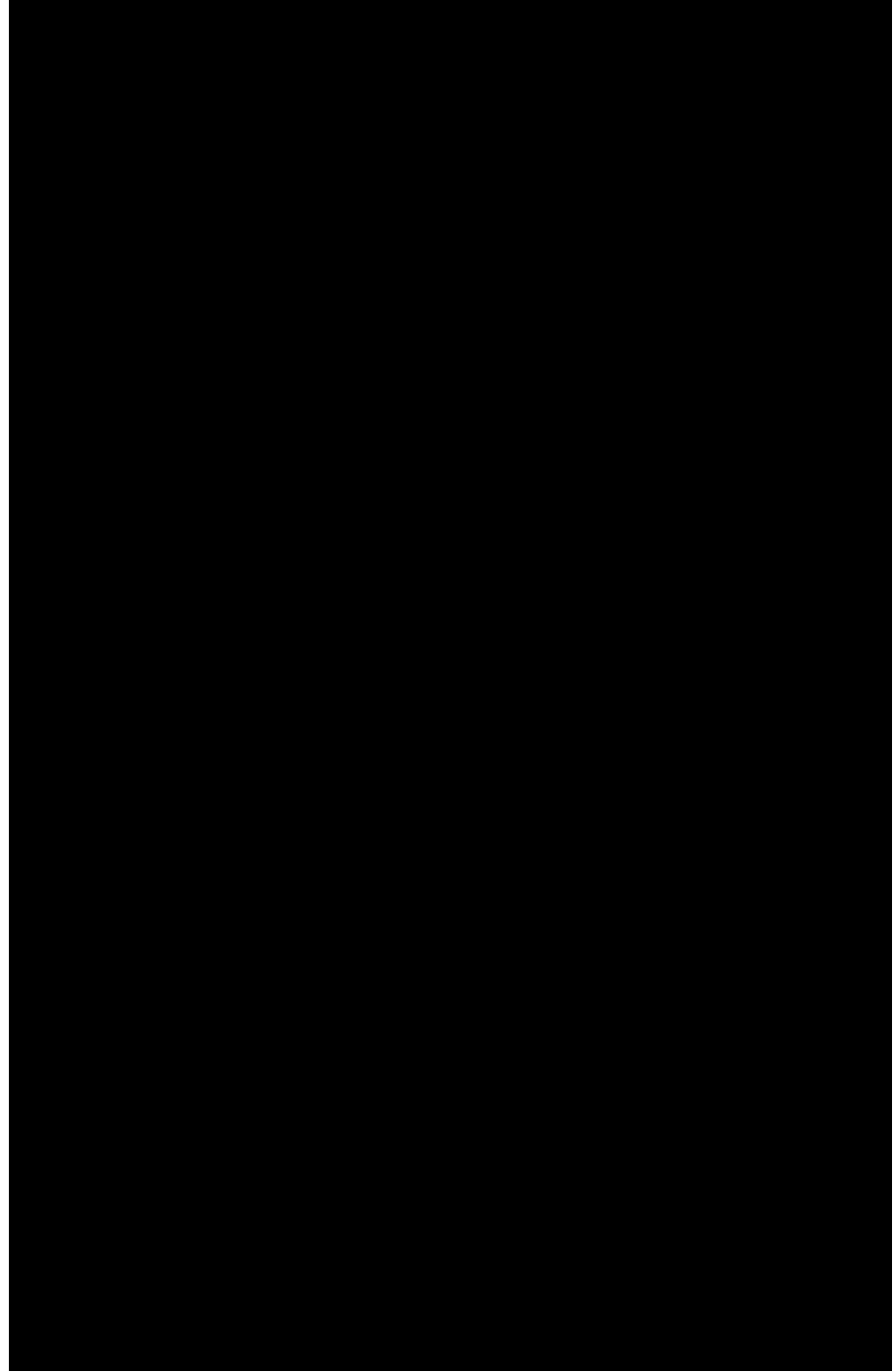
A novel by Ethan Pettus

In memory of
Joseph Conrad And
Antonio Lobo Antunes

Dedicated to
Michael Crichton And
Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

“ The sight that you see is the entrance, and the exit, and the transformation ... those who seek to obtain the art of moral perfection enter here, and become spirits by escaping from the body...”

- Zosimus Alchemista



PROLOGUE – SUKU’S NIGHTMARES

New Fátima Region, Angola. August 20, 1974.

The savanna that covered Angola’s New Fátima region was silent

and serene beneath an opulent full moon. A nomadic tribe known as the *Onjoi* had recently returned to their ancestral home on the Bié Plateau, to evade the reaches of the infernal Angolan Civil War. The native peoples of Angola, the Bantu and Ovimbundu, had been entrenched in the War of Independence against the Portuguese colonial forces for over a decade. The *Onjoi* tribe had survived by eking out a primitive existence in Angola's heart of darkness; the '*Land at the End of the World*', as it was known to the soldiers in the Portuguese military.

Sophos Patéras was the *Onjoi* tribe's *sekulu ocinibaiida*, their shamanistic chieftain. Sophos had spent nearly twenty years leading his people along the hard road to survival. It was through Sophos's cunning that the *Onjoi* had evaded the rebel militias that were constantly clashing throughout their motherland. Sophos had lost his eldest son, Eammon, to the UNITA guerrillas that controlled much of the Bié Province. The guerillas from UNITA had cornered Eammon and pressured him to give away the location of his village, but Eammon had refused; Sophos had warned his son of UNITA's tendencies for taking child soldiers. The guerillas from UNITA took Eammon's life and left his headless carcass as a warning for the *Onjoi* tribe. Sophos had buried the butchered body of his eldest son beneath a veil of scarlet bougainvillea petals as the *Onjoi* sang prayers of mourning to their god, *Suku*. The *Onjoi* believed that their motherland existed in the dreams of their god, and that each living thing on the earth was an archetypal manifestation of *Suku's* subconscious. Sophos and the *Onjoi* accepted that the realm of *Suku's* dreams had become one of nightmares, abetted by the fear and bloodlust that propelled the Angolan War of Independence. Sophos had led the *Onjoi* tribe on a seemingly endless odyssey along the Kwango River; across the Bié Plateau; over the peaks of Mount

Chrysopoeia and down through the most impenetrable, hostile jungles
ever
devised in *Suku's* dreams. Sophos navigated the *Onjoi* through
warzones
where fire and lightning-fast lead filled every inch of the open air, and
with
Suku's blessing, they had survived without a single member of the
tribe
being conscripted by a rebel army.
The *Onjoi* tribe had momentarily settled in a partition of savanna
in the New Fátima region that was far from the bombs and bullets of
war.
They were able to construct a small village of huts using adobe and
straw,
and then they began hunting and foraging through the encroaching
miombo
woodland for food. Sophos no longer led the hunters into the forest,
but he
continued to warn the young men of the dangers they faced in the
shadows
of the night. Over the past two decades, the lions and leopards had
developed a taste for the human flesh that littered Angola's primeval
battlefields.
Sophos had lost his own wife to a man-eating leopard, but that had
been a freak incident before the War began. The leopard with broken
fangs
had been reduced to hunting the easiest prey possible; a lone *Onjoi*
mother
watching over her child. The child, Sophos's second son, had only
been ten
years old when the leopard disemboweled his mother in front of him.
Sophos had tried to teach his son that there was no evil within the
leopard's
actions; the leopard was merely an animal, acting on behalf of *Suku's*
will. Sophos had patiently explained to his child that the only evil that
existed in *Suku's* dreams were the men that had been corrupted by
fear, the
men that chose to lay down the lives of their brothers. Sophos had
promised
his youngest son that he would understand fear when he passed the
rite of
Olutanu Suku Onjoi; the Trial of *Suku's* Dreams. Once the child turned
sixteen, he turned his back on the *Onjoi* tribe and fled to the city of
Silva Porto to join the Portuguese military. Sophos had been left as a

widower with no children. He redirected his attention to the *Onjoi* tribe, but even *Suku*'s greatest blessings did little to diminish the burning pangs of loss within the old shaman's heart.

Sophos was preparing a group of young *Onjoi* boys for *Olutanu Suku Onjoi* as the moon swelled full and bright within the celestial night

sky. The seven *Onjoi* initiates were dressed in springbok and ibex hides that

had been dyed red with berry juice. Each of the *Onjoi* initiates had been

bound by their wrists and ankles to the ebonywood pillars that supported the

thatch roof of the shaman's long-house. Sophos was kneeling in the center

of the expansive timber structure, chanting a prayer to *Suku* as he prepared

the *iboga*.

The powerful hallucinogenic *iboga* was the catalyst of the sacred coming-of-age ritual. The *Onjoi* believed that by ingesting the pungent bark

of an *iboga* shrub, a young *Onjoi* boy would leave his body and enter the

realm of death, the source from whence *Suku* dreamed all of reality into

existence. It was only through the process of leaving the body and experiencing that which lies beyond life that an *Onjoi* boy could truly become a man. This was the meaning of *Olutanu Suku Onjoi*; it was a challenge to see through the veil of death, to find the origin of creation. Sophos had heard of many incredible journeys and visions during

his time as the *Sekulu Ocinibaiida* of the *Onjoi* tribe, but every hallucination

was predicated by horrific physical ailments; vomiting, convulsions, sometimes even paralysis and death by toxicity. Sophos knew it was the

concept of courting death that had frightened his younger son away from

Olutanu Suku Onjoi. The boy had once told his brother Eammon that by

joining the Portuguese Military, he could escape the specter of death. Sophos often instructed the *Onjoi* initiates that a fear of death was a fear of

the unknown. Without an acceptance of the unknown, there would be

no
acceptance of *Suku*'s dreams and nightmares.
Sophos continued chanting as he poured the foul, powdered iboga
bark into the mouth of each young initiate. It only took a few minutes
for
the powerful hallucinogenic to take effect. Sophos chanted the prayers
to
Suku more loudly as the boys began to writhe, moan, and vomit from
where
they were strung in the shaman's lodge. He started a fire beneath a
circular
opening in the thatch roof where the moon hung resolute and
crystalline
white. Sophos watched the smoke waft over the craters in the moon's
face,
listening patiently as vomit splashed across the dirt floor.
Sophos often dreamt of his youngest son while performing the Rite
of Iboga. He believed that somewhere out there, his young boy had
grown
into a man that served the subconscious will of *Suku*. Sophos would
have
given everything in *Suku*'s creation to see the face of his prodigal son.
The
boy would have been a man now, if he had lived through the War of
Independence and the subsequent civil war between the multiple rebel
armies. Sophos desperately begged to *Suku* for the return of his son,
but
held no malice for the lack of a return on those prayers.
Sophos turned his attention to the present when he heard somebody
shuffling into the adobe lodge. He looked over his shoulder and saw
one of
the young *Onjoi* girls poking her head around the water-buffalo hide
hanging in the doorway. The girl immediately crinkled her nose at the
smell
of spilled stomach bile and backed an inch away in horror.
"Be gone, Toht," Sophos said. "You know no women may see-" "Sorry,
Sekulu Patéras," the girl said. She stepped out of the
shaman's lodge and spoke through the slick black sheet of bison skin.
"My
sister and I were looking for cassava by Panopolis, and we were
followed
by *ondele* through the forest. My sister saw the *ondele* first, and when
she
pointed to it...when she pointed to it..."

“*Ondele*?” Sophos repeated. “You saw demons?”
Sophos silently watched as Toht began to choke and sob. A few of the initiates were still vomiting, and one was speaking in a language that only *Suku* would ever be able to comprehend. Sophos walked to each of the boys and checked to make sure that none were asphyxiating on their own vomit. Once Sophos was sure that all of the boys would be okay, he swept aside the water buffalo hide hanging over the doorway and stepped out into the cool night.
Sophos looked down and saw Toht on her knees in the sandy clearing, crying uncontrollably with her head in her hands. Sophos knelt down before her and put a hand on each of her shoulders. His voice was rich with warmth and wisdom as he spoke; his words were like embers that crackled and popped with fiery life.
“Do not be afraid, my child,” Sophos whispered, hugging Toht. “Move through your fear. You know there are no *ondele*, child. We are safe, existing in the dreams of *Suku*. There is no *ondele* outside of the human heart, and we are far from any other people out here.”
“No, *Sekulu* Patéras,” Toht cried out, burying her face into Sophos’s shoulder. “We saw the demon; it is no nightmare, no dream! It is real, *Sekulu* Patéras. We watched it kill an elephant, but it wasn’t enough, and it followed us here!”
The child wrapped her arms around Sophos’s neck and wept. “I’m sorry, *Sekulu* Patéras– I’m sorry – the demon is here” “There are no demons, child,” Sophos said, gently pushing the girl away. “The demons are lies spread by the Portuguese missionaries, remember? They wish to keep us afraid so that we seek salvation through their God. We do not worship European gods, child, and we do not believe in their ‘demons’ and ‘devil’. Our creator *Suku* may dream of us, and he may dream of nightmares, but *Sukuis* not possessed by these ‘demons’.

Only Europeans.”

Sophos heard a boy crying for help from the lodge and turned away.

“I’m sorry, Toht, but you must return to your mother...” “It is *here*, *Sekulu* Patéras,” Toht stammered, grabbing Sophos by his shoulders. “Does *Suku* blind you to his own nightmares? Can’t you sense the *ondelenear*? Can’t you feel it?!”

Sophos tried to get out of the child’s grasp, but he was momentarily fixed in place when he detected it. It was a familiar feeling,

similar to anelephant’s footsteps reverberating through the earth beneath

his feet. Sophos could feel it running up the soles of his feet, trembling throughout his spine and extremities. The *Onjoi* often followed herds of

elephants as they migrated to watering holes, and each member of the tribe

had developed an uncanny sixth-sense from doing so.

Sophos felt his stomach turning as though he had just ingested some iboga himself. The vibrations beneath his feet were from no elephant;

they were too fast, more akin to the loping gait of a lion or an ostrich. He

quickly stepped into his lodge and came back out with a six-foot long wooden spear. The rest of the *Onjoi* were settling in for the night, cooking

baboons and fresh fish over campfires for the next morning’s meal.

Sophos

shouted to a few of the men to watch over the *Olutanu Suku Onjoi* initiates

and for Toht’s father to take her home. The child was hysterical as she begged Sophos not to track down the *ondele* alone.

Sophos wasn’t afraid; he knew no fear.

The old *Onjoi* shaman crept along on his hands and feet through the sea of waist-high loudetia grass that surrounded the village. The dry blades sliced across his bare torso, arms, and legs. He held the spear in one hand as he crawled, using the fingertips on his other hand to sense the vibrations in the earth. Whatever the demon was, it was circling the village in tightening arcs. He crossed over the older tracks of the animal and noticed that they resembled the three-toed footprints of an ostrich, only they were almost four times larger in size; as big as an elephant’s padded foot. Sophos gripped his spear tightly; he could feel the *ondele* coming towards him.

Sophos felt no fear; he trusted in *Suku*'s protection.

Sophos slowly rose to a crouch above the pale loudetia grass. He saw the domed thatch roofs of the *Onjoitribe*'s huts dotting the horizon, bisected by a wall of wavering white grass. A lone acacia tree overlooking the village held a family of shrieking, howling baboons. Sophos lowered his eyes and saw the shape of the demon passing beneath the acacia, much to the horror of the screaming primates. The black shape of the demon paused in its trot and turned its attention to the acacia, snapping its rotund jaws at the baboons in the lower branches.

The demon was like nothing Sophos had ever seen before. It was as tall as an elephant, and as long as the convoy trucks used by the Portuguese Military. The demon stood on a pair of powerful bipedal legs, but its forelimbs were a mockery; they looked to be as short as a toddler's arms. The demon's skin was covered in shining scutes and scales that glistened red like polished rubies in the moonlight. Sophos felt cold sweat forming on his body when he saw the devilish horns rising above the creature's fanged jaws.

Sophos had never seen a demon in the flesh; nor a dinosaur.

The carnotaurus spotted Sophos and charged. The *Onjoi* shaman sprang to his feet and ran away, swinging his spear as his feet bounced across the biting, sandy soil. Sophos kept running to his village as the prehistoric beast howled at his backside. He began screaming for the first time since the death of his eldest son; for the second time since finding the disemboweled remains of his wife; for the slim chance that the *Onjoi* warriors would hear his cries for help and come to his aid.

Sophos howled as powerful jaws crushed his right arm and hoisted him into the air. Sophos shrieked and kicked his legs as the carnotaurus gnawed through the flesh and bone in his bicep. Sophos's voice broke as it reached impossible decibels. The carnotaurus shook its head wildly and Sophos's right forearm was shorn free in its jaws. Sophos struck the earth and rolled to a stop at the base of the acacia tree. The baboons shrieked at the dying shaman as he curled in a ball around the blood-spouting stump of his elbow. Sophos felt himself drifting back to the resting place of *Suku* as he watched the demonic carnotaurus amble slowly towards the *Onjoi* village.

Sophos remembered his fear; he believed in *ondele*. ANIMUS
INDIVIDUATION PHASE I THE MAN OF POWER

"The first archetype of Animus development is the Man of Power. The Man of Power is the primitive base state of man; the beast of burden that wields the tools and might to reshape the earth by hand."

– Dr. Bruno Moreno

“ He belongs on one side to man’s primordial nature, which will endure as long as man has an animal body. On the other side, he is related to the highest forms of the spirit. But he only thrives when spirit and instinct are in right harmony.”

– Carl G. Jung

“ I don’t believe in man, God nor Devil. I hate the whole damned human race, including myself. I preyed upon the weak, the harmless and the unsuspecting. This lesson I was taught by others: might makes right.”

– Carl Panzram

“Minutes to midnight... only threeleft.”

– Captain Bruno Moreno CHAPTER ONE– BOUNTY HUNTERS
Outapi, Omusati Region of Namibia. Two weeks later.

The former South West Africa desert town of Outapi had become a watering hole for Marxist SWAPO guerillas. The South West Africa People’s Organization had been paving the way for Namibia’s sovereignty with the financial and military support of Cuba, Russia, and other communist regimes. In exchange for this aid, the SWAPO guerillas sent additional forces to Angola to help the MPLA combat their mutual neighboring enemy, apartheid-era South Africa. Outapi, sitting in the wastelands just outside of Angola’s southern border, had begun to buzz with arms smugglers and mercenaries between jobs.

It was the perfect place for Nguyen Con Giap’s meeting. Nguyen had agreed to meet his contact at the Ombalantu Baobab Tree, also known locally as the ‘Tree of Life’. The Ombalantu Baobab Tree stood within the walls of a former South African military base, which had become a hub for exchanging arms between the Namibia SWAPO and the Angolan MPLA rebel army. Standing nearly a hundred feet high with a trunk almost thirty feet in circumference, the hollow interior of the Ombalantu Baobab Tree had once been used as a prison. Now, it served as a bar where gun runners and soldiers of fortune could drink the scorching desert days away in the shade.

Nguyen Con Giáp was sitting at a booth carved into the inside wall of the gargantuan Tree of Life. He was a lean and muscular Vietnamese man in his mid-twenties, with jet black hair pulled back into a top-knot. His black military fatigues bore neither insignias nor patches; the paramilitary group he commanded, Quad Equitum, only existed to operate beyond the legal confines of warfare. The other three mercenaries of Quad Equitum were waiting for Pardus in a Portuguese-loaned Bravia Chaimite armored personnel carrier parked just beyond the town’s outer limits.

After the destruction of his village during the height of the Tet Offensive, Nguyen sought service with the Army of the Republic of Vietnam as a counter-guerilla specialist. Through shady backroom dealings, Nguyen was reassigned to 'The Hyenas', a black ops mercenary outfit run by the US Army's notorious General Amadeus Jericho. General Jericho had taken Nguyen under his wing, raising him over half a decade to become one of the most elite clandestine operatives working outside of America's legal sovereignty. Ownership of the contractor group transferred from General Jericho's private holdings to Solomon Aquino, C.E.O of the Axis Mundi Corporation, but the news had yet to reach the American Military. Nguyen's new life had begun with the collapse of his motherland. The bar within the Ombalantu Baobab was bustling with idle activity and fervent rumors. Some of the rougher patrons, the guerillas and rebels fresh from Angola's battlefields, were speaking in whispers about the dinosaurs that had been seen in the New Fátima Region over the prior weeks. Others spoke of Panopolis, an abandoned iron ore mine in the center of New Fátima's wilderness, and the legends of gold within its flooded oasis. None of the men had dared to enter the treacherous wastes, but some of the MPLA rebels were discussing their own plans to penetrate the heart of New Fátima. Nguyen tried to catch a little bit of each and every conversation as he listened to his contact, Marlow Kurtz, prattling on in the seat across from him.

"I did everything you asked of me," Marlow whispered. "The sabotage went off without a hitch, just as you said it would. Now, please, can we leave this continent? Somebody's put a bounty on my head on the black market and any one of these degenerates could be here to collect it."

Nguyen took a drink from his Amarula cocktail, staring at Marlow from over the rim of the glass. A few of the Swahili and Rhodesian mercenaries standing idle at the bar overheard the word 'bounty' and had turned to look, but Pardus spun the eavesdroppers back around just by nodding to the M16 resting beside his booth.

"Please, Nguyen," Marlow pleaded. "My days are numbered..."

"Relax, Mr. Kurtz," Nguyen said, raising a hand for silence. "The rest of Quad Equitum is on its way to deliver you safely to Kuito. From there, the private charter flight to Isla Olympus will only take half a day, maybe less. There's no need to panic."

"Panic?" Marlow repeated, gesturing to his surroundings. "You've brought me directly into the lions' den! Any minute, one of those agents from the Pentagon or Interpol could show up to lock me away for life in prison, if I'm not killed here first! What would my father say if he knew you were doing this? Does he know you're dangling me over the jaws of death?!"

Nguyen chuckled and lowered his glass. “Mr. Kurtz, with all due respect; your father knows everything I do before even Jericho does. Mr. Aquino paid for that privilege. You’ve paid your debts to your father; worked out this nice little deal for Axis Mundi; and now you’ll be taking a private flight across the Atlantic before the Aeon of Ouroboros begins. Now, before you forget – do you have the access drive?”

“Yes,” Marlow grunted, reaching into the pocket of his polo. He withdrew a small metal medallion, engraved with an ouroboros – a snake eating its own tail – on the front. A button in the shape of a skull was interlaid within the center of the ouroboros. Marlow pushed the skull inward, and the medallion separated into two pieces, with a computer chip inside. He snapped it back together and passed it across the wooden counter to Nguyen.

“It worked exactly as my son originally demonstrated,” Marlow said. He watched as Nguyen tied the medallion to a chain, and then entwined the chain around the hilt of his sheathed ka-bar knife. Marlow cleared his throat and said, “You promised me you would provide this evidence of my son’s whereabouts, Nguyen. It’s the only reason I ever agreed to keep working for you and my father.”

“In a minute,” Nguyen said. He raised his glass and took a long sip. “Your son’s last known whereabouts were Zaire, but I should be meeting with him shortly in Kuito. In the mean time, order yourself another shot. Our ticket to Isla Olympus should be here any second.” “God willing,” Marlow grumbled. “Or god help you.” Nguyen chuckled. “Indeed; god help us all.”

“Do you see him?”

“I think so.”

Zosimus Kaikara was standing at the bar, watching Nguyen and

Marlow from across the room. Zosimus was an indigenous Angolan; a black Ovimbundu man originally hailing from a native tribe within the wilds of the Bié Province. Standing next to the Ovimbundu bounty hunter was his partner, Josef Gustavo. Josef was the third generation in a long line of Portuguese-Angolan alcoholics and dirt farmers. They were both dressed in casual clothes; khaki pants and black shirts; blending in seamlessly with the other seedy clientele within the hollowed-out Tree of Life.

“He’s sitting across from the Asian,” Josef said, nudging Zosimus in the ribs. “Maybe if you would stop breaking out the *cocaina* whenever we’re near the Namibia border, you would have a better eye for the details, *eh*?”

Zosimus huffed, rubbing his nose as he tucked the eight-ball of cocaine back into his breast pocket. "It gives me an edge, *irmão*. I promise to you I can take both the Asian and our target within the same second. All I need is for you to keep the other tourists off my back."

Josef scoffed and lit a cigarette. "You're just afraid to go home." Zosimus motioned for the bartender to bring him another shooter of springbokkie, and then swallowed it down with a hearty cough. He said to Josef, "I fear nothing, *irmão*. I'm just not excited to be so close to the motherland. They say the MPLA will soon be eliminating all of the Portuguese left."

"What Portuguese are left?" Josef chuffed. "Suicidal loyalists, eh?" "No matter," Zosimus said, wiping his mouth dry. "Forget

Angola."

Josef withdrew a folded letter and gave it a quick glance before shoving it back into his back pocket. "According to the tip our client 'Pardus' provided, our target is 'Marlow Kurtz'; the son of a former Nazi

scientist. During the Battle of Berlin, Marlow was captured with his father

by American Forces. Marlow's teenage son was supposedly taken by the

U.S.S.R. Marlow and his father received a change of name and their identities were cleared. Now Marlow works for some military contractor

called 'Axis Mundi Corporation'."

"That means more money," Zosimus said. "For more *prostitutas*." Josef rolled his eyes as he puffed on the cigarette. "Is there nothing else you think about, *irmão*? How many bounties must we collect before we

get away from this waste of a continent? The plan was to be in Europe within a year of leaving the *Caçadores Especiais*. I didn't serve for a decade with the special forces just to waste my life in slums and brothels." Zosimus grunted. "Does the target live or die?"

Josef sighed. "Dead, *irmão*. Would you like the honors?" Zosimus held up his finger and motioned to the bartender for a bottle of Amarula. Josef shook his head in disbelief as he watched his partner down the entire bottle of crème liqueur. A pair of mercenaries, a

white Rhodesian and a black Swahili man, was watching Zosimus and Josef

from further down the bar. The pair walked over to Zosimus and Josef

with
their holstered pistols and shoulder-slung assault rifles showing.
“*Mwenza wangu* recognizes you, *mzungu*,” the Swahili mercenary
said, putting a hand on Josef’s shoulder. “You are one of the infamous
‘Jackals of Angola’, are you not? One of the greatest Portuguese
snipers
ever seen on the battlefield.”
“You must have me mistaken, my ugly friend,” Josef said. He
brushed the Swahili mercenary’s hand off of his shoulder. “I am but a poor
member of UNICEF, lost on his way to deliver some meager American
pennies to a warlord in Zaire. Perhaps *meu irmão* can take a donation.”
“*Meu irmão?*” the Rhodesian repeated. “What’re you, his master?”
Zosimus spun around and smashed the empty Amarula bottle
against the Rhodesian’s head, splitting his scalp open. The Rhodesian
howled and dropped to the floor while the Swahili mercenary lunged
towards Zosimus. Josef jumped in and grabbed the Swahili man by the
arms, pulling him back while Zosimus plunged the broken neck bottle
in
and out of the man’s stomach. Josef threw the mercenary to the floor
and
stomped down on the base of his neck, breaking the vertebrae beneath
his
boot.
The Rhodesian suddenly jumped up and shoved Josef over the bar,
flipping him over the counter. Zosimus withdrew his rusted kukri
machete
and feigned towards the Rhodesian mercenary, careful not to slip on the
blood that had been spilt from the dead Swahili man. The other
patrons of
the bar had fallen silent as they watched the white mercenary circle
the
Ovimbundu bounty hunter. Nguyen was watching from across the
room,
leaning against the Tree of Life’s inner wall.
“Come on,” Marlow whispered to Nguyen. “We need to leave.” “We
need to stall,” Nguyen whispered back. “Here – your son.” Nguyen slid
a polaroid photograph across the counter to Marlow.
Tears sluiced from the corners of Marlow’s eyes as he stared at the
picture between his trembling fingers. He looked up at Nguyen and
said, “He – he’s alive, Nguyen? In Zaire? Where has he been? Who is
he with? Is he safe?
Please, please tell me he is safe.”

Nguyen's eyes were following Zosimus as the bounty hunter beat the Rhodesian mercenary bloody against the floor. A few other patrons of the bar were trying to intervene, but Josef was keeping them at bay. Nguyen looked back to Marlow and took another drink.

"Your father, Mr. Aquino, has been searching for your son ever since he went missing in Vietnam," Nguyen said. "If Mr. Aquino hadn't paid for my freedom from General Jericho, he would have never discovered the whereabouts of your son. General Jericho and the rats back at the Pentagon would have rather kept your son and I as their own personal slaves. I owe it to Mr. Aquino to bring his grandson home alive – and to tie up loose ends."

"Loose ends?" Marlow repeated. "What loose ends?" "You," Nguyen said. "Thanks for setting off the Aeon of Ouroboros. The first 'sabotage' worked perfectly, and now the rest of Ordo Ouroboros's agents are taking care of the other colliders around the world. All thanks to you, as well as your son's original work in Vietnam. Now, if you'll excuse me, I think your ticket to Isla Olympus has arrived."

"What –" Marlow turned around and saw Zosimus beating and slashing his way through the rest of the patrons caught in the melee. Zosimus pointed at Marlow with the bloody kukri machete and bellowed his name. Marlow looked back to Nguyen, but the mercenary merely shrugged with a small smile on his face. Marlow spun around and only caught a brief glimpse of the machete as it swung for his throat.

"Well done," Nguyen said, leaning away from Marlow's arterial spray. Nguyen finished off his cocktail and rose from the booth with his M16 in hand. Zosimus raised the machete to strike, but Nguyen simply reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and extended a manila envelope to the bounty hunter. The rest of the bar patrons vacated within seconds as Josef ran to his partner.

"Who are you?" Zosimus asked. "How do you know this man?" "You may call me Pardus, Mr. Kaikara," Nguyen said. "I have a

job for you and Mr. Gustavo. My team and I need guidance through the New Fátima region. General Cavaleira of the Portuguese military recommended you ‘Jackals of Angola’ above all others.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Josef said, briefly bowing. He turned to Zosimus and said, “What the hell was that, *irmão*? Have you lost your goddamned mind? Next time, just use your gun, for god’s sake. There’s no need to be such a brute in front of a new client.”

Zosimus opened the manila envelope and his jaw slipped open; it was stuffed with nearly \$50,000 worth of small bills, nearly twice the price of the original bounty on Marlow Kurtz’s head. He passed the envelope to Josef and said, “My apologies, Mr. Pardus, but I will not work in Angola. It is a personal preference. I hope you understand.”

“That fifty-grand bundle was just a token of appreciation,” Nguyen said. “If you agree to serve as a guide for Quad Equitum during our journey into New Fátima, the payout will be \$250,000.”

“Each,” Josef said. “Right?”

“Each of you, per day,” Nguyen smiled. “Fair?”

“*Sim*,” Josef exclaimed, shaking Nguyen’s hand. He ignored Zosimus’s eyes on the back of his neck. “When do we start, Pardus? Where shall we go first?”

“Our ride to Kuito is waiting outside,” Pardus said. “Just do me a favor and burn this place to the ground on the way out. We don’t need anybody picking up on the evidence of your most recent bounty. Mr. Kurtz has been a thorn in my employer’s side ever since he stopped working for the Axis Mundi Corporation.”

Josef and Zosimus each took out several white phosphorous grenades as Pardus walked to the front door. The bounty hunters chucked the incendiary munitions over their shoulders as they followed Pardus out into the sandswept street, where Quad Equitum’s Bravia Chaimite armored personnel carrier was waiting beneath a full moon. The Ombalantu Baobab exploded in a ball of white fire behind them as they climbed inside,

and smoldering pieces of ancient barkrained upon the vehicle's plated roof. The photo of Andrei Wynn was lost within the burning Tree of Life.

CHAPTER TWO— SOLDIERS

Virunga Mountain, Zaire.

A lone Huey Iroquois helicopter descended through the grey clouds above Virunga Mountain, sweeping over untold miles of lush rainforest like a mere mechanical locust. Small villages that had been clearcut from the multi-storied jungle appeared as brown and black pockmarks

below the buzzing helicopter. The formidable landscape surrounding Virunga concealed the countless rebel militias that had formed in opposition

to Mobutu Sese Seko, the despot that the western world had propped up in

the country that was once known as 'the Congo'.

The American helicopter was fresh from the battlefields of the Vietnam War, but the crew onboard wasn't searching for rebel militias. The

men inside of the craft were members of an elite Special Forces team known only as 'Stalker Force'. Stalker Force had been formed under the

direct command of the infamous general, Amadeus Jericho, during the height of the Vietnam War. The men of Stalker Force rarely interacted with

the military forces of the countries in which they operated. Even in the

American military, the words 'Stalker Force' had been bestowed with mythic meaning.

The men of Stalker Force weren't soldiers; they were hunters. Captain Xavier Wise of Stalker Force stared out through one of the helicopter's porthole window at Virunga Mountain, contemplating the deadly new animals that now thrived beneath its jade robes of jungle canopy. Xavier was an aging warrior; a proud descendant of the Abenaki

tribe and half a decade past thirty. His stern face was seemingly carved from

stone, adorned with numerous scars that had been carved by the teeth and

talons of voracious carnivores.

Despite being the commanding officer of Stalker Force, Xavier was the most unkempt man on the team. Xavier allowed his coarse black mane of hair to reach down to his shoulders, and his beard was

a foot-long tangle of scruffy obsidian that masked his scarred throat from the serrated fangs of the animals that Stalker Force was tracking. Xavier instinctively touched the collar of bite-mark scars around his neck as he mentally prepared to face the predators currently plaguing Zaire. According to frightened Congolese villagers, an invasive species had recently entered the rolling green foothills surrounding Virunga Mountain. The government of Zaire had reached out to the American military for help, and Stalker Force was sent in to investigate. Stalker Force specialized in tracking down and killing dangerous animals that had been migrating from Vietnam to the furthest reaches of the Old World. Xavier never would have expected the primeval beasts to make it as far as SubSaharan Africa, but the cunning and intelligence of Stalker Force's hunting quarry never ceased to stupefy the captain. Xavier anxiously scratched the bite-marks wrapped around his throat as the helicopter tilted through turbulence. Hunting their quarry had been a thrilling challenge, and thankfully one that had kept the men of Stalker Force far away from the brutal conflicts of man. Xavier had once served in the Vietnam War with Vulture Squad, a search-and-rescue team that specialized in saving other Special Forces units. The men of Vulture Squad had been the first Americans to discover the prehistoric creatures in an isolated jungle valley, far north of the Vietnamese DMZ. The helicopter pilot's intercom buzzed, "ETA, two minutes." "Roger that," Xavier called back. "Set us down in the village. I doubt the utahraptors will have remained for long." "But you've been wrong before," Andrei Wynn replied. Andrei Wynn, the science adviser of Stalker Force, was sitting across from Xavier in the rocking Huey Iroquois. The former-Russian scientist was dressed in khaki fatigues that resembled the uniform of a safari guide, with a leather bush-hat slouching over his frayed blond hair. Andrei had become a world-renowned scientist in his field of research, but only the leaders of the countries in which Stalker Force had operated within knew of his expertise. After being left for dead by the Soviet Union, the Russian scientist had spent the following years

serving Stalker Force and the United States military.

Andrei had been the first to ‘discover’ the anomaly of the ancient animals, as well as the man responsible for the creatures being brought to the modern world. Andrei had spent a year living amongst them; or rather, cowering in fear from them. After Xavier and Vulture Squad had rescued him from the wretched valley in Vietnam, Andrei had been recruited by General Jericho to help Stalker Force track the prehistoric animals across the earth. Andrei had prospered from his new life’s work, and with Xavier’s help he was able to overcome his own crippling morphine addiction. “Do you have the dossier?” Xavier shouted to Andrei. “*Dah*, I do,” Andrei shouted back. He pulled a manila envelope from his rucksack and flipped through a ream of paper inside. There were numerous sketches of the animals they had been tracking, as well as topographical maps of Virunga and the translated statements of the villagers that had been interrogated by Zaire’s military officials. Andrei passed the documents to Xavier and said, “It sounds like typical utahraptor behavior, comrade.”

“Listen up, Stalker Force,” Xavier called out. “Here’s the intel.” The other members of Stalker Force leaned forward in their seats to listen. It was a small, tight-knit group; there was Syd Kinane, Xavier’s second in command; Lalo Flores, the medic; Willard Bennington, the newest recruit; and James Molnar, the CQB specialist. Stalker Force had lost three men on their last mission along the Nile River, and Xavier didn’t intend to add any other names to the list of casualties. Xavier’s voice was turning hoarse from shouting to be heard over the helicopter’s rotor blades. He said, “One week ago, ‘raptors were sighted on the outskirts of a village to the south of Virunga Mountain. The villagers managed to drive them off by shouting and shooting some AK47’s, but

the
'raptors returned. Several villagers were taken that night, but the
elders of
the tribe didn't believe the animals were responsible."
"Why's that?" James Molnar asked. He was short, stocky and
muscular, with a low-cut mohawk and mischievous eyes that never
seemed
to stop leering. His nose was hooked like a beak, perched over a
perpetual
ear-to-ear grin. "Are they used to losing people in the night? They still
got
Mokele-Mbembeto worry about?"
"Get serious, Molnar," Xavier said. "Lives are at stake." "The villages
around here are used to civil conflict," Andrei said.
"Small tribal sects and militias often clash throughout these mountains
over
the natural resources. The villager that was sent for help claimed that
she
didn't believe it was an attack from a militia or a rival tribe, as it
didn't
follow the usual *modus operandi* of those attacks."
"Not the usual *modus operandi*?" Willard Bennington repeated.
Willard was a lanky 22 year old and fresh out of college. He had a
cleanshaven head and sharp, angular facial features. Cold blue flames
were
tattooed around his wrists, creeping up to his elbows as half-sleeves.
Willard was the youngest rookie to ever serve in Stalker Force, and
the only
member without former Special Forces experience. Willard had been
brought into Stalker Force by his uncle, General Jericho, due to his
love for
dinosaurs and ecological sciences. Xavier and Syd made sure to put
the
rookie through a training gauntlet of their own devising before
approving
him for service with Stalker Force.
Willard said, "What M.O are the villagers here used to seeing?" "The
villagers here are used to seeing man-made atrocities, comrade,"
Andrei said. "Butchering by machetes; gunshot wounds; even poisoned
arrows and spears get thrown out here. If you can imagine a way
to kill somebody, it's probably already been done before, here in
Zaire." "There it is," Molnar said, snapping his fingers. "The *Shadow*."
"Dah," Andrei said. "Except this situation wasn't like that, the
usual *Shadow* of mankind showing its face. Apparently, the people that

went missing had seemingly vanished without a trace of what had happened. Some of these militias like to kidnap kids and incorporate them in their ranks as child soldiers, but the people that had been taken were adult men; warriors and hunters. If it had been a militia, they wouldn't have bothered to be stealthy in the night. They would have gone into that village and done away with anybody there."

"Jesus," Willard said, swallowing hoarsely. "What a nightmare." Xavier flipped through the dossier and shouted, "The government of Zaire hasn't investigated yet, as they're too preoccupied with rebuilding what country they were left with after Belgium's de-colonization of the Congo. Atrocities between competing militias and tribes happen pretty regularly here, so the federal response to events like this always tends to be slow. Since the village disappearances match the hunting tactics of our 'raptors, we're going to check it out for ourselves. We'll see what we can find out from the villagers."

Molnar laughed. "Did you brush up on your *Kikongo*?" "No, but the chieftain speaks English, so we're going straight to him," Andrei said. He turned and looked out through the porthole windows of the cabin. The broad leaves of 120-foot tall limba trees filled Andrei's view through the glass as the helicopter descended upon the village. The tree-line of the surrounding jungle was an impenetrable wall that obscured any sense of distance or space beyond; a perfect habitat for the Utah raptors that Stalker Force had been tracking.

The rotor blades slowed down to a soft *whumping* beat before ceasing entirely. Andrei and Xavier glanced at the village through the window and exchanged a cautious look with one another. Whenever Stalker Force arrived in a remote village, they were usually welcomed by ecstatic villagers or wary onlookers. They were rarely ever met with complete silence; that is, except for in the worst of situations. Xavier would have preferred to have been met with a firefight than with the silence that

preceded the presence of utahraptors.
Xavier stood up and waved everybody outside. The men gathered their rifles and rucksacks and filed out through the bay door. Once everybody was outside, Xavier stuck his head into the cockpit and said to the helicopter pilot, "Keep the engines ready in case we need to make an emergency evac. We don't know what we're gonna find out there."
"You got it, boss," the pilot said.
Xavier slapped the pilot on the shoulder and stepped out of the helicopter, into the clearing. The glade they had landed in was carpeted in luscious green grass that reached up over their belts. Xavier let his M16 lead the way as he kept his eyes open for snakes on the forest floor. During his earlier days as the captain of Stalker Force, Xavier had lost a recruit to the venomous bite of a Chinese Moccasin snake. He wasn't keen on following in that kid's footsteps.
The men of Stalker Force were silent as they approached the village. There were several adobe huts with thatch roofs sitting in the center of the rain-washed glade. Xavier listened intently to the surrounding forest as the group approached the primitive settlement. He heard the layered songs of innumerable exotic birds, swarms of chattering insects, and various apes howling from the tree-tops. Xavier took the natural ambiance as a good sign; the utahraptors were usually camouflaged by the horrified silence of any modern wildlife within their proximity.
The closer Stalker Force came to the village, the more unsettled Xavier became by the lack of signs of human habitation. Slain monkeys and river-caught fish rotted from where they were hung on poles around the adobe shelters. The prior week of rainfall had transformed the cooking fire pits into greasy, brackish puddles.
Xavier raised a fist to halt his silent procession of soldiers. He pointed a finger at Molnar and Willard and directed them to go east,

then
motioned Lalo and Syd to the west. The group separated to investigate the
surrounding forest while Xavier led Andrei to the interior of the
village. A
cool breeze pulsed through the humid air, bringing a quick moment of
relief
to Xavier's skin in the sweltering climate. Xavier took a deep breath
and
held the air tight in his lungs.
The taste of human decay lingered on Xavier's tongue. Xavier exhaled
slowly and covered his mouth with one hand.
Andrei paused to ask what was wrong, but he immediately reacted
when he
caught a taste of the wind. Andrei gagged and turned away, covering
his
face. No matter how many times the Russian scientist had been met
with the
familiar sour stench, he had never been able to cope with the odor as
well as
the soldiers of Stalker Force.
Xavier moved more slowly into the village. He scanned the ground
and caught sight of spilled blood on the front of a hut. Xavier leaned
closer
and ran his fingers through the red smear. The blood had long since
dried; it
chipped like paint beneath his thumbnail. Xavier sighed through his
teeth
and flicked the residual flakes from his fingertips. Andrei gathered his
bearings and came to Xavier's side, wiping bile from his lips with the
sleeve of his khaki jacket. Xavier stepped inside of the hut while
Andrei
lingered outside, nervously wringing his bush-hat in both hands.
"We're in a graveyard," Andrei said. "I don't like this, comrade."
"Then don't come in here," Xavier grunted. "You'll hate it." Inside of
the hut, Xavier had found the remains of what he
believed had once been a woman and child. The carcasses had quickly
decomposed inside of the dank shelter, but he was able to discern the
sex of
the larger, nude corpse. He knelt beside the bodies and examined
them
closely, studying the bloated masses for signs of physical trauma. All
that
remained of the dead woman's stomach was a gored-out pit, festering

with maggots where her innards should have been. Xavier pulled his eyes away from the worms writhing within the woman's bisecting wound and turned to look at the body of the child. The infant had to have been less than four years old; a toddler. What surprised Xavier about the child's corpse was that most of the flesh had been stripped from the body. The infant's limbs had been pulled from their sockets and were nowhere to be found. Xavier shook his head and climbed out through the shallow doorway. Andrei was standing outside, his hands clasped over his mouth.

"What did you find?" Andrei asked, speaking through his fingers. "Two bodies; a woman and child," Xavier said. "The woman appears to have been killed by a 'raptor, but I can't imagine why the animal wouldn't have taken her away. It looks like 'raptors took the innards from the mother and ate what they could off of the kid." "Absolutely disgusting," Andrei muttered. He reached into his rucksack and pulled out a journal. "I'll write it down in my *Bestiary* notes.

Would you mind going on without me?"

"Of course not," Xavier said. "Keep your sidearm close." "Dah," Andrei said, patting his holstered revolver. "Always." Xavier held his M16 in both hands and continued further into the village. As he walked, he found more evidence of what had happened since

the lone villager had escaped to alert the Zaire authorities. Spent shell casings and boot-prints were scattered through the muddy footpaths. Splashed blood and gaping bullet holes covered the faces of the adobe shelters. Xavier was beginning to wonder if he had been mistaken, if there had actually been a battle between the villagers and another tribe. There was

always the possibility that one of the rebel militias had attacked... Xavier approached the largest shelter in the center of the clearing; the chieftain's longhouse. An assortment of long, gashing claw marks scarred the sides of the clay shelter. Xavier ran his hand along the length of the lacerated adobe and found a feather stuck in the muddy surface.

He plucked the feather from the ochre clay and held it before the hovering sun. The quills of the feather displayed a kaleidoscope of tans, blacks, and earthy browns. When Xavier dropped the feather, it seemed to vanish instantly within the loudetia grass; perfect camouflage for an ambush predator. "We have 'raptors,'" Xavier called over his shoulder. Andrei snorted derisively. "Colorme shocked, comrade." Willard hollered, "We definitely have 'raptors, Captain Wise!" Xavier and Andrei turned and ran across the village to the sound of Willard's voice. They found Molnar and the young rookie crouched at the edge of the forest that hemmed in the clearing. Molnar was tugging on what appeared to be a long, tapering log that had become overgrown with wiry yellow grass. Xavier wasn't easily deceived; he immediately recognized it as the tip of a utahraptor's tail. Xavier put a hand on Willard's shoulder. "Good work, Benny." "I wish you wouldn't call me that, sir," Willard said. He was leaning forward with his hands on his knees, studying the animal. "This 'raptor isn't a big one; it might be a young male.'" "Dah," Andrei said. He smiled and winked at Willard. "Good eye." "Thank you, sir," Willard said, saluting with a grin. Molnar laughed. "Teacher's pet." "Shut up, sheet-freak," Willard snapped back. "Go tune out." "Act your age," Xavier said. "We just found some deadbodies." "So did we," Molnar said. "We found the reason for thebodies." Xavier elbowed Molnar out of the way and knelt down to examine the dead animal. He felt the thick coat of feathers beneath his bare hands, shivering from the rush of adrenaline for being so close to an apex predator. He had nearly lost his life to these creatures more times than he cared to remember. Xavier had lost some of his closest friends, as well as most of his teammates from Vulture Squad, to the utahraptors from Vietnam. The utahraptor carcass was roughly fifteen feet long, half of that length being the stiff tail that counter-balanced the animal's weight

while running. The bipedal legs were powerfully built, with a lethal nine-inch long talon on the second toe of each foot. The deadutahraptor's feathered forearms resembled the wings of a condor, but terminated in grasping, clawed hands. The carcass's neck was contorted in death, arching back to reveal the tawny mane around its throat.

The head of the utahraptor was almost a foot and a half long, with a snout brimming full of serrulated fangs. The jaws were angular and robust, built for shearing flesh and breaking bone. Xavier crept closer to the head of the animal and pulled one of the eyelids open, revealing the golden iris that haunted his dreams. Xavier released the eyelid and doubled back involuntarily, letting go of his breath in a soft gasp.

"It's almost as big as the one that killed Malcolm and Grant," Molnar said. His lips were pulled back in a lecherous smile, but his eyes were dark and weary beyond his years. Willard quickly turned on his heel at the mention of their dead squad-mates and paced across the village, his M16 raised to his cheek. Xavier elbowed Molnar in the ribs as they watched the rookie walk away.

"What," Molnar said, looking at Xavier. "What'd I say?" "Too soon, Molnar," Xavier said. "Way too soon."

"If I had a nickel every time I heard that," Molnar said, shaking his head. He looked up at Xavier and said, "Come on boss, it was forever ago. They're in a better place than we are right now."

"That doesn't mean that Benny's okay with it, Molnar," Xavier said. "He's just a kid. He's still getting used to death."

"Hey, what's living but dying?" Molnar replied. "They left their fleshy shells, so what? They're in the ether," he wiggled his fingers in the open air with a sardonic, wide-eyed look of wonder. "They're all around us, as intangible as the space between my ears."

"You're fucking crazy, Molnar," Xavier said, rising to his feet. He wiped his hands off on his chest and looked away from the dead

utahraptor.
Seeing the golden eye of the beast had brought forth a relentless
barrage of
memories from Vietnam, of his fallen squad-mates from Vulture Squad
and
his own prior brushes with death. Xavier cleared his throat nervously
and
looked at Andrei. "Looks like one of Xipetotec's packmates; a *citrinitas*
utahraptor."

"It would appear so," Andrei muttered. Stalker Force's primary
target was an alpha male utahraptor they had nicknamed *Xipetotec*,
after the
Aztec deity *Xipe-Totec*. Xipetotec had been the first of the utahraptors
to
flee from the valley in Vietnam, leading an entire colony to the
Annamite
mountain range of Laos. It was through actively hunting Xipetotec and
his
colony that Stalker Force had discovered the four different subtypes of
the
utahraptors.

The *Nigredo* utahraptors, the green and black-feathered ambush
predators that originally plagued Vietnam, had spread across most of
South
East Asia. After the *Nigredo* utahraptors came the *Albedo* utahraptors;
white
and black-feathered carnivores that specialized in solitary lifestyles
within
colder climates. The third subtype were the *Rubedo* utahraptors; black
and
red-feathered predators that thrived in arid mountain ranges. The
yellow and black subtype, the *Citrinitas* utahraptors, were the most
recent subtype seen following Xipetotec along the Nile River. Despite
the innumerable colonies of utahraptors claiming the untamed
wilderness of the world as their own,
Xipetotec remained Stalker Force's main target.

When Xavier and Andrei started to study the ecology of the valley
in Vietnam, they had discovered that some of the utahraptors were
carrying
nine different variations of an ancient plasmodium virus. This as-of-
yet
undocumented pathogen from prehistory became known as the
Dromaeosaurid Mutagen, or DM-1 through DM-9. The tenth iteration
of the

Dromaeosaurid Mutagen, DM-10, was the only mutation of the virus communicable between utahraptors and humans. Andrei had theorized that

DM-10 had developed in Xipetotec after the utahraptor had been exposed to

the litany of viral diseases that populated the tunnels of the Ho Chi Minh

Trail...

Syd shouted from across the village, "Radio, boss!" "Be there in a minute," Xavier shouted back. He held his rifle and jogged across the village, leaving Andrei to study the dead utahraptor. When Xavier went to the opposite end of the clearing, he found more human corpses scattered around the adobe shelters. Some were missing

limbs; others had been disemboweled or torn to pieces. Xavier tried to ignore the shadowy pits of their eye sockets.

Xavier found Lalo Flores and Syd Kinane standing side-by-side at the edge of the clearing, with Willard kneeling on the grass between them.

The rookie had both of his hands clasped over his mouth as he stared down

an embankment, into a pit out of Xavier's line of sight. Xavier was about to

ask Willard what was wrong, but when he looked past the three men, he

found the unspeakable answer.

In a shallow basin at the edge of the forest, dozens of dead human bodies had been dumped into a muddy grave. It had been a man-made massacre; Xavier recognized the lashed wounds of machete blades.

Most of the bodies were badly lacerated or completely decapitated.

Willard was moaning through his hand, stifling the vomit surging in his gut. Xavier immediately grabbed him by the shoulders and turned him away from the

rotting pit, pushing him back to the village.

"Benny, go find Andrei," Xavier said. "Now."

"I'm – I'm sorry sorry, sir," Willard choked, stumbling away. Xavier watched as the rookie staggered out of sight. He turned to look at his second in command, Syd Kinane, and the medic of Stalker Force, Lalo Flores.

Lalo Flores shook his head and let out a low whistle. He was a Hispanic American; a Cuban soldier who had defected from Fidel Castro's

Special Forces, *El Leóns*. Lalo had left Cuba after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, selling out Soviet secrets to the CIA in exchange for

American

citizenship. Lalo scratched the five 'o clock shadow bristling from his cheeks and said to Xavier, "I've seen things, *jefe*, but not like this...

never

like this."

Xavier grumbled, "Who decided to let Benny sit and stare at a mass grave? He's a fucking kid, for god's sake. General Jericho's going to

chew me out when his nephew comes back with PTSD."

"It's good for him," Syd Kinane said.

Xavier's second in command of Stalker Force was a goliath of a man. He was nearly six and a half feet tall, and 280 pounds of muscle. Before serving in Stalker Force, Syd had been drafted into the military as an

alternative to jail time. Syd had spent his twenties in the Hell's Angels, fighting in illegal underground boxing rings. He had chosen to fight in Vietnam instead of facing a decade inside of a prison cell. Luckily for Syd,

he was already a natural-born killer by the age of 25.

Syd said, "Benny's got to learn how to accept death sooner or later. He already saw us lose Malcolm and Grant. We lost, what, five other recruits before Benny joined the team? He's never served in the field for

any other platoon. He doesn't have any idea what war is like." Xavier reached up and smacked the back of Syd's helmet. "We're not soldiers anymore, Kinane; we're hunters. Just because he's young doesn't mean he needs to be shell-shocked like we were."

"He'll learn," Syd said. He nodded his chin at the mass grave, buzzing beneath a blanket of flies and mosquitoes. "Guess this means there

aren't any dinosaurs around here; just savages."

"Wrong," Xavier said. "Molnar and Benny found a Utah raptor across the village. I suppose they came back to clean up after whatever

militia or rival tribe had their way with these villagers."

"I can't wait to get the hell off of this continent," Lalo said. "Give him the radio, Syd. Hopefully we'll be sent back to India. I liked the food

there. Whatever they call it, '*vindaloo*' or something..."

Syd took out the bulky steel radio from his backpack and gave it to Xavier. While Xavier turned the dials and spoke into the headset, Syd turned back to the mass grave with a look of distant apathy. He shook his

head and said to Lalo, "These tribal people are savages. They're all

animals,
all over the world. Just laying claim to whatever they like; land; lives;
women; children. Shit here's no different than it was in 'Nam. We'd be
better off without, if you ask me."
"Good thing nobody asked you," Lalo grunted.
"No, honestly," Syd said, draping his heavy arm over Lalo's
shoulders. "Think about it; animals tend to kill what they eat, and
nothing
more. Maybe some of the smarter animals, like chimpanzees or
leopards,
maybe some of those like to kill for fun, kill for the sake of killing.
Those
are some of the dominant life-forms on the planet. But people? Well,
people
kill for any reason they can find. Any and every reason. Praying and
digging and soul-searching for a reason to end a life."
"Nah, *hermano*, don't talk like that," Lalo said, shrugging off
Syd's thick arm. "Not all people are bad. I mean, hell, what are we
here for?
We're not here to hurt anybody. None of the people in this village
were
trying to hurt anybody. There's always that fight, between the savages
and
the innocent, but that's all it is, regardless of the nations or people
involved.
That's life. It's not all of us, as a species, that have to be done away
with.
Just the savages that do this kind of *mierda*."
"But the savages aren't going to die out," Syd drawled, stroking
his handlebar moustache. "It's got to be all of us, together. I mean,
look at
this; this hole in the ground; this pool of water that's just filled with
insects,
parasites, rotting shit and decaying meat slipping free from skeletons.
Its
how all of humanity is going to end up if we don't purge the
cancerous
savages from the human race. Just look at it, Flores."
"I'd rather not," Lalo said, covering his mouth.
"That's just it," Syd said. "That's how it'll end; with all of us." "You
and Molnar, you're both fucking *loco*," Lalo said. He
coughed into his jacket sleeve and started walking across the village.
"I'm
sick of this stink. Let me know when we get to leave."

“Not soon enough, let me tell you,” Syd called over his shoulder. He turned to Xavier. “When are we leaving, boss? We going back to India or not?”

“Gimme a second,” Xavier said. He put the headset back to his ear. On the other end of the line, an unfamiliar voice was whispering secrets to

Xavier through the static.

“...A city in Angola called Kuito; used to be called Silva Porto,” the voice on the radio said. “Be there by nightfall. You’ll take a plane, arrive around twenty-two hundred, then sleep for a night in the barracks

with the Portuguese forces in the city. At oh-eight-hundred the following day, we’re bringing in additional forces to assist. We have a very important

mission for your team. Keep it quiet.”

“And who did you say this was?” Xavier asked.

“Disciple,” the voice said. “That’s my call-sign. I work for the Central Intelligence Agency. General Jericho said you’re the best of the best

in this line of work. Everybody back at the Pentagon has been watching,

and they’re very pleased.”

“Well, you know, nothing makes me happier while staring at a mass-grave than hearing that the Pentagon is happy,” Xavier said dryly.

“We do have a problem, though – we’re missing two of our squad mates. A

sniper and his spotter. They were taken while investigating a utahraptor nest

along the Nile River.”

“Don’t worry; we already have two specialists that are familiar with the New Fátima Region being flown in to help. They’ll guide the team

and serve as your sniper-spotter. They’re contractors; bounty hunters.”

“Do they know about the dinosaurs?” Xavier asked.

Disciple laughed over the radio. “*Please*. Everybody knows about the dinosaurs. They just don’t know about where they came from, other

than Vietnam. The news about the virus hasn’t made it through the press

circuit yet, but you can thank our friends at the CDC and WHO for that. I’d

rather we keep that information to ourselves, to not scare off our new

help. I hope you're ready to work with them. Disciple, over and out." Xavier listened as Disciple's voice faded away to crackling static. Xavier frowned and placed the headset back onto the radio. Holding the radio in one hand and his rifle in the other, Xavier stood and turned away from the mass grave. He walked across the ruins of the village to where the rest of Stalker Force had gathered around the utahraptor carcass. Willard was pallid and trembling, crouched in a ball with half-digested C-ration vomit drying on his lips. Molnar was kneeling in the grass beside the sick rookie. "Easy does it, Benny," Molnar said, slapping Willard on the shoulder. "You don't wanna keep that picture in your head too long on your own accord. It'll pop up on its own, anyways. The bad memories always come back in your nightmares, whether you're sleeping or not..." "Thanks, Molnar," Willard muttered. He played with a utahraptor feather between his fingers, making the earthen colors shift and blur in the sunlight. Willard tossed the feather into the air and watched as it was carried away by the wind. "I'm still getting used to the...day-time nightmares..." "Me, I see my nightmares every day," Molnar said. "Good times with the Rangers in 'Nam. Real good times. I remember seeing a couple quetzalcoatlus kill damn near everybody on Jericho's base once. That was a shocker. Nobody even knew I was there; I was still playing dead in a tree when Jericho's troops came back to check the place out." "Keep it to yourself, Molnar," Xavier said. "No more stories." "Hey, why does everybody get to ramble except for me?" Molnar said. "I've got interesting things to say. Crazy memories; batshit experiences. I could tell you anything you'd ever wanna hear." "Nobody wants to hear it, Molnar," Syd grunted. "Drop it." "Says the *loco chico* rambling about our extinction," Lalo said. "Just save the stories for the ride south," Xavier said. He looked at the men surrounding him and said, "Everybody get your gear and get to the

helicopter. We're about to fly to Angola for another mission."
"Angola?" Andrei repeated, looking up from the dead citrinitas
utahraptor at Xavier. "Why are we going to Angola, comrade? There's
no
way the animals could have gotten that far in such a short span of
time." "Don't ask me; I was told to keep it hush-hush," Xavier said,
shrugging. "Did you learn anything else about your 'specimen' here?
Think
Xipetotec is still hanging around, or has he moved on?"
Andrei waited until the rest of the team had filed into the helicopter
before continuing to speak. "I don't know, comrade. It's certainly a
member
of Xipetotec's colony, and it tested positive for DM-10. I'm not sure if
it's
possible for Xipetotec and the *citrinitas* utahraptors to have migrated
out of
Zaire by now, but I'm sure this trip to Angola will prove to be
enlightening,
dah?"
"Better hope those specialists know what they're getting into,"
Xavier mumbled. The rotor blades of the Huey Iroquois spun to life
with a
gusting roar. Andrei scrawled some final notes into his journal and
rose
from the utahraptor carcass, walking across the reeking village to the
helicopter. Xavier paused to glance back at the dead utahraptor
carcass,
nervously chewing on his beard. With one last forlorn look at the
village,
Xavier climbed into the helicopter and tried to forget the scent of
human
decay beneath the sweltering African sun.

CHAPTER THREE- MERCENARIES

Outskirts of Kuito, Angola.

The cramped interior of the Bravia Chaimite was a rank,
sweltering cauldron. The vehicle's outer steel plating shook and
rattled each
time one of the vehicle's eight wheels bounced across the rutted earth.
The
Portuguese military had loaned the vehicle to Quad Equitum for their
rendezvous with the *Jackals of Angola*. It was apparent to Zosimus
Kaikara
that the beaten APC had spent as much time in the War for
Independence as

he had with Josef.

Pardus had sculpted the other three mercenaries of Quad Equitum into his own ideal servants and soldiers. Pardus's second in command was a

lanky African-American man going by the callsign 'Logos'. Logos had been a career Green Beret until he met Pardus on a joint operation in Cambodia, tracking gun-runners along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Logos had

used his wealth from working with Quad Equitum to purchase land for his

family, as well as to support his wife and their only child.

'Thanatos', the explosive ordinance specialist of Quad Equitum, was a former member of the British Special Air Service. With his wily red

beard and short, stocky frame, Thanatos resembled a Gaelic Celt more than

a Special Forces soldier. Thanatos had been booted out of the British SAS

for his implication in a diamond-smuggling operation during the Rhodesian

Bush War. General Jericho had paid the British government under the table

for Thanatos's freedom and future service in Quad Equitum.

Thanatos's

expertise in crafting improvised explosive devices had served well in staging false-flag attacks in Soviet-allied nations.

The fourth team-mate was the newest member of Quad Equitum, a former Israeli Mossad agent going by the callsign 'Eros'. Eros had fought

against the Soviet-backed Egyptian and Syrian forces with Pardus during

the Yom Kippur War. Pardus had seen an opportunity for recruitment when he had seen Eros's faith in his own motherland begin to wane.

After learning of his own country's attack against an American warship, the USS Liberty, Eros abandoned his position within the counter-intelligence unit

and joined Pardus's wealthy outfit.

The only man in the Bravia Chaimite without prior combat experience was a Japanese-American CIA agent going by the call-sign 'Disciple'. He had barely said a word to either Zosimus or Josef when they

had climbed aboard the Bravia Chaimite with Pardus. Pardus had explained

to them that Disciple was their 'handler' for the mission ahead; the

CIA's personal eyes and ears from the Pentagon. Disciple was dressed in the same black battle fatigues as Quad Equitum, but Zosimus recognized him as a natural desk-jockey almost immediately. Zosimus only caught glimpses of the other men onboard when slivers of moonlight fell through the APC's side vents. The ember of Josef's cigarette flickered in a slow rhythm across from Zosimus as it was smoked down to the filter. Zosimus felt his stomach turning at the smell of the stale tobacco, and the Bravia Chaimite's battered shocks weren't helping. Zosimus was desperately hungry after their frantic stop-and-go journey from Namibia to Angola. He would have given his left arm for a meal that wasn't field-dressed, cooked over a campfire. Josef flicked the smoldering cigarette butt at Zosimus. "Hungry, *irmão*?" "Sim," Zosimus said. "Anything I don't have to hunt, for once." "*Como nos velhos tempos*," Josef grinned, his row of gilded teeth glittering in the sporadic moonlight. "Just like old times, as the Americans say. Always hungry for extra rations during the long rides in the Bravia Chaimites. Trading cigarettes for cans of stew. Seems like some things never change, *irmão*. Maybe Angola will bring you back to your roots." "Angola only brings people to their base nature," Zosimus said. His neck was starting to ache from having to hunch forward in the cramped cabin. He scratched the coarse whiskers framing his square jaw and said, "Even when the Portuguese concede, the rebel armies keep the violence going. They'll wipe each other out soon enough. The Portuguese will be able to walk back in and take the land from what Bantu peoples are left alive." "God willing," Josef said, lighting another Camel. "*C'est la vie*." "So it goes," Pardus said. "As an old friend of mine used to say." Zosimus and Josef both looked at the Vietnamese leader of Quad Equitum, slouched in a seat on the other end of the cabin. Pardus stopped sharpening his ka-bar and touched the pendant hanging from the blade's

hilt. Pardus rotated the talisman between his thumb and index finger and said, "Just as you said, bounty hunter; warzones bring everybody to their base nature."

Zosimus grunted, "Is this your first time in Angola?" Pardus stopped spinning his talisman.

"No," Pardus said, inhaling sharply through his teeth. "I've been here before. Plenty of other countries in Africa, too. But the statement remains the same regardless of the motherland wrought with war.

Every battlefield reduces man to his animal nature...all it takes is fear, and the sight of blood."

"You wouldn't say the same of America," Josef said. "I wouldn't," Pardus said. "I've never been there to see it for myself. But we members of Quad Equitum have seen the same thing everywhere we go; civil conflict; mass rape; mass graves. I wouldn't be surprised to see or hear of the same things in Los Angeles or New York City. Fear, violence; these concepts aren't new to me. I've seen men reduced to their animalistic nature ever since I was a child in Vietnam. My motherland made me into an orphan, and America adopted me just to turn me loose on a whole world of other bastards like me."

Zosimus shifted uncomfortably beneath Pardus's unwavering gaze. He was waiting to see the strange Vietnamese man blink, but it never seemed to happen. Zosimus clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth

and looked back to the cherry glowing at the end of Josef's cigarette.

"We vowed never to return," Zosimus said. "Yet here we are." "Here we are," Josef said, exhaling smoke through his teeth. "The prodigal sons return," Pardus said. His eyes had yet to move, their lids unyielding. "We won't have to be here for long. It's going to be an

easy mission, in and out, then back to our mansions. Logos just purchased

an old plantation in Jamaica. Growing ganja for the Rastafarians. He'll be

retiring on the land that his ancestors used to till for the British; their slave masters' land."

"Forty acres," Logos called over his shoulder from the driver's seat. He kept his eyes on the narrow dirt road as he steered the Bravia

Chaimite through pitch-blackjungle. "Ain't got me a mule yet, though." "Capital," Pardus said. "That is the only avenue of freedom in this world. The Communists and the Soviets are only seeking control through enforced altruism; through the division of capital. The truly free men of the earth, those in the democratic nations, they pay for their freedom with capital and blood. If you want to be free of Africa, you must pay for your way out, just as I paid my way out of that whore, Vietnam." "Meu irmão isn't the greatest at saving his money," Josef said, reaching across the aisle to slap Zosimus's shoulder. "As soon as he turns in a bounty, he's a ghost – *zip* - gone to the nearest brothel or bar to find a courtesan and a drink. Isn't that right, *irmão*?" "I need my sleep," Zosimus said. He shrugged and looked away. "I never have nightmares when I get to sleep with a woman. A few bottles under my belt, some ganja and a quick lay, and I can finally sleep through the night. No more nightmares." "And no more money," Josef laughed. "That means more work." "Get a wife," Logos called over his shoulder. "They cost less." "Sounds like you've never been divorced," Disciple said. The CIA agent had been silent and motionless beside Zosimus for the entirety of the drive. Zosimus had begun to wonder if the Japanese American had fallen asleep. Disciple said, "Trust me; without prenuptials, alimony and child support will suck your savings dry." "Have you ever been married?" Josef asked. "Twice," Disciple sighed. "Not looking for any more ex-misses." "Yet," Josef laughed. He looked at Zosimus and said, "You need to listen to Logos, *irmão*. If you keep slumming it up with these refugee prostitutes, you'll end up shackled with six Ovimbundu kids, like all the other Portuguese soldiers. You want to be free? Let's take this mission to its end and get off of this dead continent. We won't ever have to take another job after this contract. We'll be free from this place, *irmão*. Finally

free.” “For the time being,” Pardus said. He leaned forward and pointed the serrated end of his ka-bar at Zosimus. “General Jericho is giving you enough money to get off of this dying continent, but not enough to retire. If you want retirement money, you’ll want to work with us. One mission with Quad Equitumand you’ll be set for life. You can consider any mission after that as an investment.”

Zosimus couldn’t meet Pardus’s eyes; his focus was on the cutting end of the ka-bar. Zosimus had seen similar blades being used by Ovimbundu rebels to mutilate and decapitate the Portuguese, as well as each other. The Portuguese *Caçadores Especiais* that Zosimus and Josef had served with were prone to equally violent retaliations whenever they discovered the butchered remains of their brothers-in-arms. Zosimus stared at Pardus’s dagger, but his mind was entrenched in long-suppressed memories. Zosimus could hear a Portuguese soldier’s coarse bush knife sawing through the throat of a choking Ovimbundu man.

“If your General pays so well,” Josef said, “Why are you still doing this work for him, Pardus? Why haven’t you retired yet?” “Not everything can be purchased,” Pardus said. “Some things can only be paid for with blood, bounty hunter. You should know this well.” “We don’t kill for pleasure,” Zosimus grunted. “It’s only business.”

“So you do kill for pleasure,” Pardus said. “In a round-about way.” “*Verdade*,” Josef said, grinning around his cigarette. “Pardus sees right through you, *irmão*. Next he’ll be giving you a psycho-analysis. Give him your cut of our pay and maybe he’ll interpret your dreams. If I had an *escudo* for every time I tried...I wouldn’t be in this shit-box.” “Think about it, Zosimus,” Pardus said. Moonlight flickered through the cigarette smoke hanging between them. “Think of me as a talent scout. If this mission goes well, you can keep working with us. General Jericho will pay your way to any country you choose. All it takes is one mission; one big payday to last the rest of your life. Unless you want more

than wealth, that is...if that's the case,you'll want to talk to me *without* Jericho."

"*Meu irmão* doesn't work alone," Josef said. "And I don't come cheap, either. I'm going to need to retire in Europe if I have to work for Americans. Soak in the culture and sip champagne to get the taste out of my mouth, you see."

"Of course," Pardus said. He played with the talisman dangling from his ka-bar's hilt as he watched Zosimus's face. "We don't have any fear here in Quad Equitum, you see. We brandish it as our blade. We wear it as armor and camouflage. Wherever we go, our enemies' fear disguises us as *shadows*; monsters;devils. We don't know fear because we don't see our enemies as devils; we only see people; animals; weakness; fear. We get paid for their fear, bounty hunter."

The Bravia Chaimite shuddered as it drove across foot-deep potholes in the dirt road. The vehicle's loose armor plating swung out and clacked back against the porthole windows. Moonlight strobed through the smoky cabin and Zosimus felt his stomach churn. Zosimus hiccupped and felt hot bile creep up his throat; half-digested baboon meat. Disciple caught a whiff and covered his nose, waving a hand in front.

"Jesus," Disciple said. "What the hell did you eat?"

"Bush-meat," Zosimus hiccupped. "*Kinda Baboon*."

"*Kinda* baboon?" Disciple repeated. "What kind of baboon?" "*Kinda*," Zosimus grunted. "Is the species name."

"Baboons and fear," Josef said, snapping his fingers at Zosimus.

"Like Pardus was saying. Remember the story, *irmão*? About the baboons?

You told me about it back in Silva Porta. The story of the baboons, where they come from. The old Ovimbundu legend."

"It isn't Ovimbundu," Zosimus said. "It is *Onjoi*."

"What's *Onjoi*?" Pardus asked, leaning forward intently. "People?"

"*Onjoi* is an Umbundu word that means 'Dream'," Zosimus said.

"I come from the *Onjoi* tribe of the Ovimbundu people. They used to live

along the Kwango River, but they became nomadic at the start of the War

for Independence. If Jonas Savimbi and UNITA have had their way with the

Bié Plateau, all of the *Onjoi* people are either fighting for UNITA or dead

by their hand."

"You don't know?" Pardus said. "Are you afraid for them?" "No,"

Zosimus said, exhaling through his teeth. "I am not." "*Meu*

irmão wouldn't be here if it wasn't for me," Josef said,

looking at Pardus. "Without me, you would have had to have dragged

Zosimus back to Angola. He treats his motherland like a disease, as if

she will infect his soul with some virus. He's scared of becoming like

all the

other blood-crazed Ovimbundu rebels."

"Speak for yourself," Zosimus said to Josef. "Portuguese dog." "Aye,"

Thanatos, the British mercenary, said from the passenger

seat in the cab. "The Portuguese are just as bedeviled as the natives.

You

heard the news, Pardus? The fascist loyalists have been choppin' up

just as

many natives as the rebels."

Zosimus remembered the smell of burning thatch huts and his

stomach roiled violently. The laughter of Portuguese soldiers entwined

with

the screams of Ovimbundu women in Zosimus's mind. His eyes

watered

from the smoke, the heat, the soot caking his skin. Zosimus clenched

his

fists until the fires were quelled from his mind and the memories

dissolved

like ashes in his subconscious. He was acutely aware that the

memories of

burning villages would be resurrected in his nightmares.

"Bounty hunter," Pardus said. "Tell me your... *Onjoi* story." Zosimus's

eyes fell to a tattoo on his left forearm. It was a crude

rendition of a wooden mask that had been carved into the shape of a

baboon's shrieking face. The tattooed mask was vaguely

anthropomorphic,

but the distended jaws and elongated canines belied any humanity.

Zosimus

traced the black fangs of the tattoo as he looked into its hollow eye

sockets. "The *Onjoi* believed that baboons were once human," Zosimus

said. He raised his voice to be heard over the Bravia Chaimite's

grinding
tire treads. "The *Onjoi* believe that we exist in the dreams of the creator
god, *Suku*. In the dreams of *Suku*, the nightmares are known as *ondele*; demons. When the first *Onjoi* people encountered a leopard, they believed it
to be *ondele*, and they were changed forever by their fear."
Pardus and the other men were watching the bounty hunter expectantly. Zosimus caught his breath as he stared at the tattooed effigy
screaming mutely from his skin Zosimus had sworn to Josef on drunken nights that he could hear the baboon shrieking with the voices of dying
Ovimbundu.
"The warriors of the *Onjoi* had chosen to brandish their spears and face down *Suku*'s snarling nightmare, the leopard," Zosimus continued. "The *Onjoi* tribesman that were afraid, however, were...*transmuted* by their fear. They screamed until their jaws stretched to snouts, and the hair
sprouted from their bodies, as if fleeing from their skin in terror. When the
brave men of the *Onjoi* had scared the leopard away, they found that half of
their tribe had become mindless baboons, incapable of reason or thought." "The only story I've ever heard that's held truth," Pardus said.
"You could say that ninety percent of the human race is comprised of these
baboons. The other ten percent are the only true men of power on this earth;
the only men worthy of charting its course. The earth truly belongs to those
men, the leopards like you and I. As my favorite western philosopher once
said; *might makes right*."
Disciple yawned. "Not according to democracy, Pardus." "Yes, the 'meek' shall inherit the earth," Pardus said. "A barren
earth scorched by atomic and nuclear hellfire. The baboons will be there to
pick up where the leopards left off. The blood of the baboons will continue
to souse the earth until the land is fertile enough for agriculture. The sacrifices will lead to societies and civilization, and the cycle will repeat

until there are no more people; no more leopards to be afraid of, nor baboons to fear them.”

Zosimus looked up from the tattoo at Pardus.

“What are you afraid of, bounty hunter?” Pardus asked. “Not a leopard,” Zosimus grunted. “I know no fear.” “Lies,” Pardus laughed, shaking his head. “Everybody knows fear.”

The Bravia Chaimite’s engine groaned lethargically as all eight of its tires ground to a halt. Logos leaned over the steering wheel and peered through the bullet-proof windshield at a blockade in the road. The ruddy dirt path they had been following led through opposing walls of tulip and kikula trees. The grass of the open savanna beyond shone resplendent white like ivory beneath the full moon. A pair of UNITA trucks were idling in the

center of the dirt path, blocking the Bravia Chaimite from the road to Kuito. Thanatos pounded the roof of the Bravia Chaimite with his meaty

fist and said, “Run’m down, Logos. These dole bludgers must be legless to

be blockin’ my way to the kip.”

“Legless?” Disciple repeated from the cabin. “Kip?”

“Hush yer gob, ya bloody yank,” Thanatos grunted. “Unless you feel like paying these rebels their toll. Should only take a few hundred dosh...maybe your head, too...”

“Eros,” Pardus exhaled. “Pay the toll, please.”

Zosimus and Josef leaned back in their seats as the Israeli mercenary walked down the aisle between them. Eros opened a hatch in the

cabin roof and hoisted himself up to the .50 Browning heavy machine gun

mounted on top of the vehicle. A few of the UNITA rebels surrounding the

two rickshaw trucks started to open fire on the Bravia Chaimite with their

own shotguns and AK47’s. The sound of the gunfire was muffled through

the vehicle’s thick armor plating. Zosimus noticed that Disciple flinched in

sync with each shell that clinked harmlessly against the APC’s chassis.

“Ugly tossers,” Thanatos spat, stroking his tangled red beard.

“They’ve got those beautiful American firearms from Disciple’s bosses in

the CIA and they’re letting them go to waste. What’s the point of sending

all that dosh to these twits if they don't have the mind to use them right?" "Tossers?" Disciple repeated, frowning.

"Do you getpaid to be perpetually confused?" Logos shouted, looking over his shoulder. "Or do you get paid for selling weapons to these UNITA cats? It doesn't seem like a worthwhile investment to sell weapons to the rebels that want to kill us. Maybe you could go out and pay them to go away."

"Eros," Pardus interrupted. "Now, please."

The interior of the Bravia Chaimite became filled with the chugging roar of the .50 Browning heavy machine gun. Logos and Thanatos

watched through the windshield as Eros used the stream of lead to mince

the bodies of the UNITA rebels. After mowing down all of the Ovimbundu

men, Eros opened fire on the trucks that were blocking the road. The gas

tanks of both trucks ignited and the vehicles exploded, bending the towering

kikula trees backwards with the force of the blast.

Thanatos war-whooped and pounded the roof of the Bravia Chaimite as Logos drove through the blaze. The groaning armored personnel carrier shuddered as it shouldered through the burning trucks.

Zosimus heard the tire treads mashing the dead and dying UNITA rebels

against the rough-hewn road and he gagged involuntarily, looking away

from the bulletproof windshield. Pardus was still watching the Ovimbundu

bounty hunter from the other end of the Bravia Chaimite's cabin.

"Don't be afraid," Pardus grinned. "Not yet, *irmão*."

CHAPTER FOUR— MOTHERLAND

The sunrise over Kuito was engulfed by the roiling red clouds of an approaching sandstorm. Zosimus squinted through the port-side shutters

of the Bravia Chaimite as they passed through multiple UNITA-guarded

checkpoints on the way into the city. A socialist insurrection led by the

Portuguese MFA, the Armed Forces Movement, had deposed of the former

fascistic Estado Novo regime that had been controlling Portugal and

its overseas colonies in Africa. The Portuguese MFA was beginning to form alliances with the communist MPLA rebel army, and the Portuguese loyalists of Estado Novo were losing what control they had left in Angola. General Lobo Cavaleira and the other Portuguese loyalists remaining in Kuito had cordoned themselves into makeshift military outposts where they rubbed shoulders with Jonas Savimbi's UNITA rebels.

Although the UNITA rebels had begun with a near-Maoist doctrine, they had since become Angolan nationalists. The UNITA forces and the Portuguese loyalists had formed an uneasy alliance in the face of a common enemy; the communist and Soviet-sympathizing MPLA and MFA. In Zosimus's mind, the various rebel armies and military forces clashing in Angola were no more than acronym-labeled organizations seeking control of their shared motherland.

The Bravia Chaimite rumbled to a stop in the middle of a mortar-cratered street flanked by rows of dilapidated sandstone buildings. The sidewalks were lined with cassia trees, their yellow-flowering canopies wilting from the unseasonable drought. The rear hatch of the Bravia Chaimite opened and the crew onboard filed out into the sandstorm's scathing whirlwind. Zosimus pulled his afghan scarf up and over his mouth as he followed Disciple and Pardus through the abrasive gust. The Ovimbundu bounty hunter had last seen Kuito years ago, when he had sold his flat and left for South Africa with Josef Gustavo to work. Zosimus's former commander, General Lobo Cavaleira, was stationed in the ruins of Kuito's city hall. The colonial-age building had been constructed hundreds of years ago, when Kuito was still known as Silva Porto. Blackened bullet-holes covered the ancient building's pale sandstone façade like ants swarming over sun-bleached bone. The elongated bay windows were shattered, boarded up and webbed with razor-wire. There were no civilians of any kind visible on the street leading to the city hall; only the Portuguese military personnel and their vehicles

occupied the
sandstorm.

Decrepit jeeps and armored personnel carriers groaned unseen
from the depths of the sedimentary haze. War-weary Portuguese
soldiers

and UNITA rebels passed by Zosimus as mournful, open-mouthed
mirages.

Zosimus followed Disciple and the mercenaries of Quad Equitum past
the

spectral congregation to the front courtyard of the city hall. Zosimus
saw

the dismembered body of a bronze *Antonio De Silva Porto* statue lying
in

the parched lawn and quickly looked away. He didn't need to read the
plaque at the foot of the statue to know what it said.

Silva Porto, est. 1750

Silva Porto had once been the center of the Ovimbundu kingdom.

The Portuguese founded the city of Silva Porto in 1750 and named it
after

the colonist that had discovered the Ovimbundu Kingdom, Antonio De
Silva Porto. Up until that point, the ancestral rulers of the Ovimbundu
had

been trading slaves from the other tribes of Angola to the Europeans.
During the War of Independence, any indigenous Angolan conscripts
within

the Portuguese military were sent to Silva Porto for training. When
Zosimus

fled the *Onjoi* tribe as a teenager to join the Portuguese military, he
had

been segregated from the European soldiers and sent to boot camp
with the

other Ovimbundu in Silva Porto.

Zosimus spat on the butchered remains of the António De Silva Porto
statue as he passed. He had always felt that the other Ovimbundu
soldiers in the Portuguese military, like himself, were no different
than the slaves of the original Ovimbundu kingdom. They were
sacrificial pawns for the colonial authoritarians in Europe. Zosimus
had once believed he would find order and control over his fear of
death through joining the Portuguese
military.

Once Zosimus had climbed the ranks into the special forces, the
Caçadores Especiais, he celebrated by buying a flat in downtown Silva
Porto. Just as he had naively believed the military would eliminate his
fear

of death, so too did he foolishly think that the Portuguese of Silva Porto would treat him as their neighbor and equal. Zosimus knew that his former flat was likely housing flea-ridden rats and UNITA rebel soldiers. After a decade of fighting, most of the native Portuguese-Angolans had been chased away by the various rebel armies. Over a third of the Angolan-born Portuguese had fled to neighboring countries as refugees. The only Portuguese that remained were either soldiers or aristocrats guarded by hired paramilitary mercenaries from South Africa and Rhodesia. Any impoverished Portuguese living in rural Angola could expect a violent death at the hands of the rebel armies. Zosimus held little regard for any of his former neighbors within Angola, whether they be Portuguese or indigenous like himself. Zosimus no longer considered Angola to be his motherland; it was merely a killing field for animals disguised as men. The Ovimbundu bounty hunter could only hope that someday he would find justification for the countless lives he had claimed in the deserts, grasslands, and jungles in Angola while hunting his fellow Ovimbundu. Zosimus never remembered the names of his targets, but he held clear memories of every mission and assassination. He couldn't say who the South-Eastern UNITA Lieutenant had been, but he could perfectly describe the week-long hunt in the savanna to take that man's life. Zosimus could detail the way he had taken the Ovimbundu nationalist's life while the man had been writing letters in his tent. Zosimus could describe what the other Caçadores Especiais had done to the remains, but he couldn't guess to whom the man's life had mattered. Such was the war; an eye for an eye, to render Angolans blind. Zosimus was blind in the enveloping sandstorm as he followed Disciple and Quad Equitum through the high oak doors of the city hall. Several Portuguese soldiers fought against the wind to push the doors shut behind them. Sand scratched at the windows; the building's ancient

foundation groaned as wind pushed through its seams. Zosimus panted and pulled his afghan scarf down around his throat as Disciple walked past, pointing down a hallway leading to the Ovimbundu representatives' chamber. The CIA agent shouted over his shoulder, "Pick up the pace, people. Stalker Force is already here!" Dozens of wounded and shell-shocked Portuguese loyalist soldiers littered the floor of the hallway. The hollow eyes of the dead and dying followed Zosimus and Josef from beneath piles of tattered rags. The humid corridor was stewing with the smells of septic wounds, urine, and sweat. The battle-fatigued Portuguese croaked for water and cigarettes as Disciple and Quad Equitum marched towards the chamber doors at the end of the hall. Josef tossed his hand-rolled cigarettes left and right as he passed the whimpering beggars. Zosimus didn't make eye contact with any of the men; he was afraid of recognizing a familiar face to empathize with. The doors at the end of the hall opened to a rotund chamber filled with tables arranged in a concentric pattern. Most of the oak and ebony tables had been overturned and dismantled for firewood. The chamber walls were adorned with carved effigies and masks representing the innumerable tribes of Angola. A framed portrait of *Álvaro the First*, the Kongo king that had permitted the Portuguese to colonize Angola, was desecrated with crimson handprints where it hung on the wall. Zosimus couldn't help but wonder where the finger-painted red pigments had been procured from. He looked down from the portrait and saw the flags of Silva Porto, Angola and Portugal, torn to ribbons and piled in the center of the floor to be used as strips of gauze. Zosimus looked up from the soiled red rags and saw a group of soldiers lounging across the room, sitting in worn plush chairs; the men of Stalker Force.

Captain Xavier Wise of Stalker Force quickly rose from his seat and crossed the room to shake hands with Pardus and Disciple. He glanced at the pair of Angolan bounty hunters and said, "So you're the 'Jackals of

Angola', I hear? It's an honor to meet you both. I'm Captain Wise of Stalker Force, but you can call me Xavier."

"We're pleased to meet you, sir," Josef said. He stepped past Zosimus and vigorously shook Xavier's hand. "I've always wanted to work

with the American Special Forces. We rarely ever see your kind in Africa." "I wish it were under better conditions," Xavier said, letting his

hand drop to the machete sheathed at his waist. "My science adviser, Doctor

Wynn, is convening with General Cavallera right now, discussing the situation."

"What situation?" Zosimus said, glancing at Disciple. The CIA agent stepped forward, rubbing the bandages on his head. "The regime change of the Portuguese has created a big problem

here in the Bié Province," Disciple said. "Stalker Force and Quad Equitum

have been brought in to fix their problem for them. It's a very delicate operation, and Doctor Wynn is the only man that can understand what the

Portuguese are dealing with. With the current state of affairs, the loyalist

Portuguese serving General Cavallera don't stand a chance where we're going."

"The 'land at the end of the world'," Josef grinned. "*Sim?*"

"Unfortunately."

The men turned to see General Lobo Cavallera and Andrei Wynn of Stalker Force entering through the back door of the representatives' chamber. None of the men snapped to attention for the former Portuguese

commander. Josef put two fingers to his right eyebrow in a mock salute and

said, "Unfortunate to return to the heart of the motherland? It is a blessing, *senor.*"

General Cavallera ignored the comment as he stepped up to a podium in the center of the chamber. He was built like an Olympic longdistance runner, with a tan complexion that had come to resemble jaundice

from exhaustion and weeks of suffering with dysentery. His gaunt, hallow

face was a beaten imitation of the visage Zosimus and Josef had once associated with the supreme leader of the Portuguese military in Angola.

General Cavaleria leaned heavily over the podium, folding over at the waist

as he fought to support his own tired weight.

“Welcome to Angola,” General Cavaleria said, looking at each of the men from Quad Equitum and Stalker Force. He nodded to Josef and

Zosimus and said, “I have to say, it’s a pleasure to finally see two of the greatest *Caçadores Especiais* snipers back in Angola, serving their country.

It fills my heart with pride to know that some patriots still care for nobler

purposes.”

“There’s nothing nobler than money,” Josef said. “*Nada.*” General Cavaleria pretended not to hear him. “I am not the *mestre de cerimônias* of this international *circo*. I’m only here to allow the United

States their proper authority in this operation. This younger *cavalheiro* beside me, Disciple, is calling the shots on this mission. I’ll let him fill you

in on the intel our men have gathered.”

“*Disciple?*” Molnar groaned. “These clandestine call-signs are getting ridiculous. He’s a ‘Disciple’ of whom, our almighty god Uncle Sam?”

Willard chuckled, but Xavier shut him up with a stern look. “Don’t encourage him, Benny,” Xavier whispered.

Disciple stepped up to the podium and the chamber fell silent.

Disciple narrowed his eyes at each individual in the room. The air seemed

to turn dead between Disciple and whoever caught his judicious stare.

Pardus grinned when their eyes met.

“You will only refer to me by the call-sign that General Jericho assigned me,” Disciple said. “I didn’t pick it, nor did I pick this assignment.

I’m sure most of us would have elected to stay out of this country if given

the choice.”

“*Sim,*” Zosimus said, nodding. Josef elbowed him in the ribs. “Unless you’re getting paid, that is,” Disciple said, penetrating

Josef with a lethal glare. “I’ve been sent here to monitor this mission

and its progress through Angola. This country is in a very fragile, volatile state. I'm here to make sure everything goes by the books; we can't risk an international incident that could rope in the UN or NATO. The last time we had an operation like this, back in Vietnam, a lot of things went wrong." Disciple narrowed his eyes at Xavier.

Xavier cleared his throat and scratched the scars ringing his neck. "As you all understand, there are dinosaurs in the world, correct?"

Disciple said, looking at Josef and Zosimus. Zosimus gave a disinterested shrug whereas Josef nodded diligently.

"They came from Vietnam," Josef said. "Right?"

"I'll let Doctor Wynn explain it," Disciple said. He motioned to Andrei and stepped back into the shadows. Andrei walked up to the podium, still dressed in his dirty, sweat-stained khakis from Virunga Mountain. He was still visibly shaken from what he had seen in Zaire; a ream of classified documents shook in his trembling hands. Andrei studied the dossiers once more and looked up to the collected teams.

"Hello, comrades," Andrei said. "My name is Andrei Wynn, but you can call me Andrei, or Doctor Wynn. I was the former head scientist of military research and development for the Soviet Union in Vietnam. Before I defected and joined Stalker Force, I had been working for the Russians to create a particle-accelerator known colloquially as a 'Collider'. "The first Collider was to be used to create anti-matter for nonradioactive nuclear weapons, but our first test went wrong and created a worm-hole; a rift in space-time. The worm-hole allowed dinosaurs to enter Vietnam, and from then onward, it has been my mission with Stalker Force to track the specimens that have been migrating from Vietnam to the rest of the world."

Zosimus stared at Andrei, nonplussed. He grunted, "You're joking."

"It happened before," Andrei said. "And it's happened again." "Again?"

Xavier said, sitting up in his chair. It was hard for him to fathom that another particle collider would ever be built after the fiasco in

Vietnam. “Who in their right mind would ever build a collider here in Africa? The Russians? The Cubans?”

Syd Kinane glanced at Lalo Flores, the Cuban medic. “Don’t look at me, *chico*,” Lalo said. “I wouldn’t know.” “The collider...was built by Portugal,” Disciple said, briefly

glancing from Pardus to General Cavallera. “The Portuguese government

was attempting to procure antimatter for limitless energy, as a way to placate the economic strife that helped to fuel this Civil War. The coup by

the communist-sympathizing MFA resulted in a forced evacuation of the

project. General Cavallera and the former Novo Estado regime are afraid

that the Cubans and the communist MPLA will attempt to seize the technology for the Soviet Union.”

“So, what, this ‘collider’ is just sitting in a wilderness surrounded by dinosaurs, and you want to keep the communists from getting to it?”

Pardus said. “Don’t you think this is a responsibility for the loyalist Portuguese?”

Disciple gripped the podium. “You know it isn’t that easy, Pardus.”

“Or, even better; leave the technology for the native people of Angola,” Pardus said, leaning back in his chair. “By all means, I’m only

here to do what General Jericho asks of us, and by extension, what General

Cavallera asks of us. I’m just pointing out the pointlessness in us being involved in this endeavor when the CIA already has proxies through the

local militias.”

“The most important element of this is not letting this technology fall back into the hands of the Soviet Union,” Disciple said. “And if Doctor

Wynn and Stalker Force can investigate the new dinosaurs, we can determine if any diseases have been brought back with them. In order to do

that, we need to ensure this area is safely controlled. We can’t have that

unifying control for the greater good if we don’t eliminate the technology

that every faction will be fighting for.”

“How could Portugal develop a collider?” Pardus asked, kicking

his feet up onto the table before him. "When did they find the time to enact this research and construction in one of the most heavily rebel-occupied territories in all of Angola? How were they able to do all of this construction under the eyes of the MPLA and UNITA?" Disciple glared silently at Pardus.

"You seem to know everything," Disciple said. "You tell me." Pardus yawned and scratched his narrow jaw.

"Jericho tells me everything. I know what you know." "So what do you want from us?" Zosimus asked, looking at Disciple. "The Portuguese have come and tampered with our natural landscape for their own monetary - or military - gain, and they've created irreversible consequences. Do you expect us to clean up after them? Or do you expect us to serve as native guides for some big-game hunters?"

"Zosimus, *por favor*," General Cavalera said, stepping forward. "This mission is of the utmost importance. You and I both know that this war is lost; the rest of the Portuguese military is going to leave very soon, and we can't just abandon Angola to these prehistoric *demoníacos*. We have to solve this dinosaur problem before it all but ruins life for the villages left in this country."

Zosimus spat on the chamber floor and said, "None of you ever cared about the villages of this country. If any of the Portuguese had cared, this war would have never begun. The Ovimbundu wouldn't have been forced to work in cotton fields for meager wages as second-class citizens. If you ever cared about Angola, we wouldn't be in this room."

"If you had ever cared, you would have *stayed in your village!*" General Cavalera was red in the face as he stared down at the Ovimbundu bounty hunter. Zosimus opened his mouth to speak, but instead he slumped back in his chair, crossing his arms. Syd guffawed and slapped his knee, holding his stomach as if he had been winded.

"The native boy gets put in place," Syd said. "Classic." "*Kinane*," Xavier grunted. "Shut it."

General Cavalera cleared his throat and said to Zosimus, "Your

people need you now, more than ever, *filho*. Please, help us; not for our sake, but for their sake. It's their only chance."

"You've got me, so that means you've got *meu irmão*, too," Josef said, slapping Zosimus's shoulder. He looked to Disciple and said, "What's the plan? Where do we begin?"

"We need you and Zosimus to help guide Quad Equitum to the Portuguese collider," Disciple said. "The two of you are the most highly recommended native-born Angolans that aren't currently connected to the Portuguese military, loyalist or MFA. General Cavaleira's loyalists can't help in any other capacity."

Disciple pointed to a map pinned to the back wall of the chamber and said, "The Collider is in an unpopulated area in the center of the Bié Plateau known as the *New Fátima Region*. New Fátima is mostly savanna, with miombo woodlands and denser jungles surrounding it. There is an abandoned mining outpost in the center of the region, and an old shipping dock set against the Akhmim River that runs down from the southern mountain range. The highest mountain, *Mount Chrysopoeia*, is where the abandoned collider is located."

Disciple turned his back to the map and said, "The mission is simple. Find the Collider and destroy it. Quad Equitum will be handling the demolitions as Stalker Force deals with the dinosaurs. Zosimus and Josef will help me lead the way, as they best understand this country and its dangers. Are we understood?"

"*Entendido*," Josef said. He nudged Zosimus with his elbow.

"What do you say, *irmão*? Down to hunt something other than people for a change?"

Zosimus sighed. "It seems you made the decision for me, *irmão*." "In that case," Xavier said. "Welcome to Stalker Force." "Relax, Wise," Pardus said, raising a hand. "The *Jackals of Angola* are unofficial members of Quad Equitum as of this mission. Quad Equitum's paying them; not the US military. They'll be under my command

as long as we're out in the field. Unless Disciple has any objections..." "No," Disciple said, shaking his head. "I mean, yes. Pardus is right. But *I'm* overseeing this entire operation. Regardless of what either Captain Wise or Pardus says, all decisions are under my discretion. This mission isn't an exercise in democracy; the Pentagon is treating this operation with the utmost care."

"If that's the case, why is a Cuban on this mission?" Pardus grunted. "We know that Castro's Special Forces, *El Leóns*, are pushing into

New Fátima. Lalo Flores of Stalker Force used to be one of their own. Who's to say he isn't piping information to them right now?" Lalo glared at Pardus from across the room. "Quiet, *puto*." "He's got a point, Flores," Syd grunted. "How's ol' Castro doin'?" "Drop the xenophobia, Kinane," Disciple growled from the podium. "We're dealing with a situation where we can't make any assumptions of the people we're interacting with, and that means not making baseless prejudices against any of the people in Angola or each other! If I hear another baseless accusation from you, I'm going to bring

your record to bear and let the Uniform Code of Military Justice toss your ass in the stockade!"

Syd mirrored Pardus's posture, leaning back and putting his size-14 boots onto the desk in front of him. He rolled his broad shoulders and

examined the well-chewed nails on his right hand. "No, sir, I reckon you

won't. General Jericho and I got a good understanding. You ain't bringing

up no records that ain't had no bearing since I was in 'Nam." "*Tiger Force*, Kinane," Disciple said, leaning over the podium.

"Jericho might keep people like you and your old buddies from Tiger Force

safe and in-rotation to keep our country from getting a black eye, but this

isn't Jericho's mission. It's *mine*. I've read the records of everybody in this

room, and I'm not letting any of you would-be war criminals get away with

any negligent wrong-doing. The same goes for Quad Equitum and Pardus." "Jericho's shown me every file," Pardus said. "All of it." "That so, gook?" Syd said, raising his voice. "Tell us." Pardus grinned at Disciple. The CIA agent shrunk back. "I'm on your side," Pardus said.

“Those V.C gooks had it coming.” “This debriefing is over,” Disciple grunted, stepping around the podium. “I’m going to speak with Doctor Wynn about the collider in private. Get to know each other before we leave; you’ve all got an hour to be at the city hall’s garage for exfil.” Disciple strode out of the room with General Cavallera and Andrei Wynn, slamming the door shut behind them. Xavier looked at Syd with eyes that betrayed his typically calm façade and said, “What was that about war crimes, Kinane? What files?”

Syd looked expectantly at Pardus.

“Classified,” Pardus said. “Fear can make monsters of men.” “Off to a great start,” Xavier sighed. “I’m already scared.”

CHAPTER FIVE - PERSONA

Once the meeting had adjourned, Zosimus Kaikara met with Xavier Wise while Josef Gustavo caught up with General Lobo Cavallera.

Quad Equitum and the rest of Stalker Force were fraternizing in the garage attached to the Kuito city hall, waiting for mission exfil. Zosimus and Xavier were walking through an empty wing of the city hall, their boots scuffing across the chipped tile floor. Yellowing sepia photographs and decrepit Ovimbundu artifacts hung in disarray along the length of the corridor. The mounted heads of lions and water buffalo watched Zosimus and Xavier from the termite-chewed walls.

Zosimus exchanged a glance with a baboon that had cobwebs where its glass eyes had once been. Zosimus grunted as he passed beneath the taxidermied animal’s distended jaws, uncomfortable with the macabre gaze of its empty sockets. Despite the hellish conditions of Kuito and its denizens, Xavier seemed completely at peace to the Ovimbundu bounty hunter.

“We’ve been hunting these animals for years, Zosimus,” Xavier said, motioning to the stuffed predators as he walked. “Your motherland’s lions and leopards are nothing compared to the dinosaurs. No animal on

earth has ever proven itself to be more deadly, more sophisticated, or more ruthless than the utahraptors we've been tracking from 'Nam." "Except for people," Zosimus said. He scratched the emergent beard bristling from his cheeks. "But I don't think you have experience hunting human beings like *meu irmão* and I."

"You would be wrong," Xavier said. "I spent several years with other Special Forces units during the Vietnam War. Before being made captain of Stalker Force, I was a member of Vulture Squad; a search and rescue team that specialized in saving Special Forces soldiers and prisoners of war. I've spilt more human blood than I care to remember; enough to fill a lifetime of sleepless nights."

Zosimus chuffed, bemused. "If you want to speak of nightmares, you've come to the right place. I served the Portuguese here for nearly a decade, hunting rebel soldiers throughout Angola's wilderness. I don't care to fight a war without a purpose, and I care even less to guide big-game hunters on an African safari. I wouldn't be here if I hadn't been dragged by *meu irmão*, Josef."

"So I've heard," Xavier said. "You have to understand that this isn't a game tous. This is something that the world desperately needs. I've seen countless villages slaughtered by these animals, and entire countries thrown into disarray with the presence of quetzalcoatlus; deinonychus; kaprosuchus; you name it. These animals aren't just a threat to people; they're a threat to the entire natural order. We have to stop their migration before this world becomes unrecognizable and inhospitable for most of life on earth."

"Humanity has already made Angola inhospitable," Zosimus grumbled. "You're wasting your time if you think we can save this collapsing nation. None of this has a purpose if all of human life eats itself out of existence. This country is at the brink of dystopia. There's already

stories of cannibalism in the south.”
They came to a stop at a pair of mahogany doors at the end of the hallway. Xavier gripped the brass doorknob and said, “Look, Zosimus; I get it. We’ve both seen what people are capable of doing to each other, but I know what these dinosaurs are capable of. You can help us stop the utahraptors from doing to your country what they’ve done to South-East Asia, but you can’t stop human nature. Utahraptors can go extinct, but wars won’t. People won’t stop waging war until there’s nobody left to fight.” Zosimus didn’t speak, tightening his jaw.
“You can see to the extinction of a dangerous animal, or you can join your own species in extinction,” Xavier said. “Your choice. Now go to the garage and get acquainted with your new squadmates. We’re leaving this dead town in thirty minutes. Hopefully we can turn the tide of this collider-situation before the rest of your country follows suit.” “You should listen to the Wiseman, bounty hunter.” Zosimus and Xavier turned to see Pardus watching them from an archway at the opposite end of the corridor. The young Vietnamese mercenary was leaning against the wall, lazily spinning his ka-bar in one hand. Zosimus’s eyes fell to the talisman twirling from the hilt of the blade, blinking like a singular eye in Pardus’s palm. Pardus slipped the ka-bar into its sheath when he caught Zosimus staring.
“You don’t want to go in there,” Pardus said, nodding to the oak doors where Zosimus and Xavier were standing. “Disciple is busy in there talking to the Russian bastard. A pretty stern talking to, from what Jericho told me before this operation.”
“I don’t take kindly to being told what to do by paramilitary operators,” Xavier said, smiling grimly at Pardus. “Whatever Jericho tells you, you’re still just a hired gun from Vietnam to me. If I want to speak to my Science Officer, I’m damn well going to do it, *Nguyen*.”
“Ah-ahah,” Pardus smiled, wagging his finger. “You didn’t say the magic word, Captain Wise. My call-sign is Pardus, not ‘Nguyen’.”
My

name is my own and doesn't belong in your mouth. Just because you wear

insignias and snap to attention for Jericho doesn't mean you're not a hired

gun like Zosimus and I. Don't act like serving in your motherland's machine of war doesn't come with its paid benefits. I've been around your

kind long enough to know the perks that come with your job of bloodshed." Xavier's ragged black beard shifted around a bitter scowl.

"I didn't realize killing dinosaurs was the same as murdering people," Xavier grumbled. "I've been tracking utahraptors to prevent the spread of plague and pestilence for four goddamned *years* that I'm never getting back. I've been fighting to keep your people from getting eaten or stricken with DM-10. What have you been doing, Nguyen? Killing to fill Jericho's wallet? All you gun-for-hire types care about is the next

paycheck."

Pardus laughed bitterly; it sounded like he was coughing up phlegm.

"And despite all of your efforts with Stalker Force, all of the efforts of America, my country still fell," Pardus said. "Vietnam collapsed

under your dinosaurs and their plague. What people are still alive in Vietnam are under the control of the Communists. So much for the efforts

of the United States and the military might of the West. So much for the

ideals of liberty and democracy. The only true freedom comes from power

and wealth, attained by blood. Zosimus can attest to that can't you, bounty

hunter?"

"No," Zosimus said. He ignored the eyes of the moth-bitten leopards and lions as he turned and strode down the corridor. Zosimus couldn't bear to look at the yellowing photographed faces of long-dead

Portuguese colonists. He called over his shoulder, "I wouldn't know freedom. If I were free, I wouldn't be here."

Pardus and Xavier watched as Zosimus ducked around the archway at the end of the hall. Pardus turned back to Xavier and shrugged.

His black fatigues were creased with red dust; it made Xavier think of the

countless Vietnamese villagers he had seen cooked to cinders by

napalm bombs and flamethrowers. He remembered the charred body of Xipetotec the utahraptor, the DM-10 plague carrier, and he shuddered involuntarily. "You're scared," Pardus said. "You should fear for the Doctor." Pardus turned and followed Zosimus's path out of the corridor, whistling *Sympathy for the Devil* as he winked at the framed sepia portraits of Ovimbundu chieftains. Xavier looked back to the doors of the chamber where Disciple and Andrei Wynn were having their private meeting. He pressed his ear to the door and heard the young scientist emphatically cursing at the CIA agent in a string of Russian slurs. Xavier shook his head and stepped back from the door. Xavier wasn't scared for Andrei; he was worried about Pardus.

"Cyka bylat, you people are all the same!"

Disciple was watching Andrei Wynn as the young scientist paced back and forth in the Ovimbundu representative's chamber. Andrei spun around and said, "This should have never happened again; it was never meant to happen at all!"

Andrei strode up to Disciple and thrust his index finger into the Japanese American's stocky torso. "This entire operation is one big pile of shit and we both know it, Disciple. You're accusing Portugal for this mess? General Cavaleira is taking the blame, and for what? We all know the bastards to blame for the mess Angola is in now. Hell, the entire world will have to face the consequences of this collider malfunction!"

"You need to calm down, Doctor Wynn," Disciple grunted. "Keep in mind that you're not a part of the military; you're nothing in Stalker Force. You aren't even on Jericho's payroll as a contractor like Quad Equitum or the Jackals of Angola right now. You belong to the CIA, which means you belong to me. You're not just a prisoner, Doctor Wynn— in the eyes of the Pentagon, you're less than a slave."

Andrei clenched his fist and hissed, "This 'accident' was impossible. The chances of the first collider creating a wormhole were one in a million— the fact that dinosaurs came from it was by pure horrific probability. How in the hell could this 'Portuguese' collider create an identical mistake, with identical results? It's a statistical impossibility any way you attempt to obfuscate the facts."

"I'm not sure how it could be possible," Disciple said. "But I intend to find out when we get to this collider. You're going to take a look at it for me and write a report for General Jericho, General Cavallera; hell, the Pentagon and every intel officer from NATO will be reading it over. But the only answers we're going to get are going to come from you, when we get to the collider."

"*Cyka blyat*," Andrei snapped, kicking the podium at the head of the chamber. He whirled around and aimed a trembling finger at Disciple. "You can't treat this operation like a charade! You have no idea what the scientists behind the construction of this collider have done. Stalker Force and I have been attempting to correct my mistakes for the past four years, nailing down every loose end that the Russians left behind after the first collider malfunctioned. And what were Vulture Squad and Stalker Force's sacrifices for? So it could happen *again*? *Zhopu porvu margala vikoliu, you bureaucratic prostitutk.*"

Disciple blinked; his round face turned stony.

"I understand your accusations, Doctor Wynn," Disciple said in a cold tone. "Yes, this is almost certainly a statistical impossibility. Unless, of course, the Portuguese collider was sourced from the same blueprints as the Russian collider in Vietnam. Specifically, the one that *you* had designed. If you were implying that this collider was..."

"Stolen," Andrei spat, standing eye-to-eye with Disciple. "Say it."

"...Reverseengineered," Disciple continued. "If this collider was reverse-engineered from the blueprints you laid forth for the Soviet Union, I would have to ask you a question. A very simple question. But it's a question that I don't anticipate you'll answer until the interrogators at Guantanamo Bay *make* you. Which, I presume, is going to be the case."

Andrei shrank back an inch, falling back onto his heels.

"My only question," Disciple said, clasping his hands behind his back, "Is why you would design a collider for the Soviet Union that was intended to implode? Why would you build a collider with this... ulterior function...which allows for wormholes to reach back to the Mesozoic period? The President of the United States, the Secretary of Defense, and the rest of my peers at the Pentagon would like to know the answer to that question."

Andrei's face drained of color. His lower jaw fell.

"Of course," Disciple said, turning his back on Andrei. "The only reason this question needs to be answered— whether or not the collider blueprints were designed with this ulterior purpose — is because the Axis Mundi Corporation, an American military contractor, would have a lot at stake if that were the case. The collider in Angola belongs to Portugal, but that doesn't mean the technology is isolated to Angola."

Andrei began to feel dizzy. “How many more colliders are there?”

Disciple shrugged as he opened the chamber doors.

“Enough for us to be in Angola, Doctor Wynn.”

Andrei wavered where he stood as he watched the Japanese American CIA agent exit the chamber. Andrei sat down on the over-turned podium and held his head in his hands. His mouth was dry; his body was damp with cold sweat despite the arid heat trapped within the dilapidated building. He wiped the sweat from his face and looked at his hands; the hands that had drawn the schematics of the original collider. Andrei knew that he had irreparably reshaped the future of the earth and its inhabitants by his own designs. A long-abandoned thirst for morphine rose in Andrei’s throat, like the sensation of vomit rising up his esophagus whenever he saw a utahraptor’s disemboweled victim.

Andrei knew that if the West had colliders, so did the Soviet Union.

“We’re survivors,” Syd Kinane said. “Plain and simple.”

Syd Kinane, the second in command of Stalker Force, was leaning against the concave hood of a prototype XR311 High Mobility Combat Vehicle. The heavily armored machine resembled a space-age reinterpretation of the M151 combat jeeps that had been in use by the US military since the 1950’s. Disciple had two of the experimental protohumvee’s flown into Kuito and stored in the garage behind city hall for the mission to New Fátima.

“Dinosaurs ain’t shit,” Logos said. “And neither are you, hick.”

“Y’all spooks ain’t shit,” Syd grunted, hoisting his 6’5 figure into the bed of an XR311. He wrapped his thick, nail-bitten fingers around the pistol grip of the XM174 grenade launcher that was mounted to the roll bars of the armor-plated vehicle. He stared down the iron sights of the automatic grenade launcher at Logos, the African-American member of Quad Equitum.

“All you money-hungry types are just bottom feeders,” Syd said. “You see these vehicles Disciple brought in for us? This grenade launcher ain’t just for show, boy. It’s for big fucking birds, dinosaurs, and any dumb fuckin’ rebels that get in the way.”

“Careful,” James Molnar said. Stalker Force’s CQB specialist climbed into the bed of the adjacent XR311 and studied the M2 Browning machine gun anchored to its roll bars. “You keep talking so much, Kinane, and you’re going to have tsetse flies laying eggs in your mouth. Flores will be pulling their maggots out of your gums.”

“Teat-see?” Syd said. “What the hell is a *teensiefly*?”

“Parasites, *hermano*,” Lalo Flores said. The Cuban medic of Stalker Force had his head under the hood of the other XR311. He straightened up and slammed the lid shut with an appreciative whistle. “Hell of a ride, *amigo*. Eighty, ninety miles per hour max. This

thing will have us flying across the savanna in style.”

“General Jericho spared no expense,” Logos said, crossing his arms.

“What I don’t get is what Captain Wise is doing with some racist exTiger Force member working under his command. Pardus might not tell us everything Jericho knows, but I used to be in the Green Beret. I heard all about you killers in Tiger Force. Bunch of ugly barbarians and baby killers”

“Quit yer dole bludgin’, Logos,” Thanatos, the British member of Quad Equitum, said. Thanatos and Eros, the Israeli member of Quad Equitum, were standing off to the side with their rucksacks readied for the journey. “Don’t go dragging Kinane here and his ol’ outfit like all you yanks aren’t cut from the same babykillin’ cloth. Right, Kinane?”

“Right,” Syd grunted. He wouldn’t meet their eyes.

“Baby killers,” Logos said, spitting on the stained concrete floor. “I ain’t ever ended the life of an innocent, ‘specially not any women or kids. I don’t care if you did nothing or not; Parduswon’t tell. But you were with the baby killers until they were caught. And where’d you end up? Chasing dinosaurs. Don’t tell me any bullshit about survival. The only thing you survived was the war crimes investigation.”

“Kinane’s not wrong,” Eros said. “These goyim are survivors– we’re looking at what’s left of Stalker Force. Captain Wise has gone through, what, six other recruits? Six of the ‘best of the best’ in the American military that got chewed up, eaten, or dismembered by big birds with fucking *barbed tongues*. I say fuck the past; all sins are forgiven. If you can keep us all alive and out of the jaws of dinosaurs, I’m happy to work with any supposed baby killer.”

“Aye,” Thanatos said, strokinghis tangled red beard. “Bloody delighted to be in the ranks of baby killers and dinosaur hunters, so long’s they’ve got good aim and strongnerves.”

“No fear,” Willard Bennington said from beneath the XR311 that Molnar was standing on. Stalker Force’s young rookie climbed out from under the vehicle and dusted himself off. “That’s what Captain Wise always says. No fear; no mistakes; no casualties.”

“More than enough casualties,” Logos scoffed. “Apparently.”

“It comes with the job, boy,” Syd grunted.

Logos glared at Syd. “You call me ‘boy’ one more time -I don’t care what kind of dinosaurs you’ve killed, what kind of people you murdered none of it. You disrespect me one more time and I’m feeding your tongue back to your whitetrash ass.”

“Save the pleasantries, Logos.”

The group turned to see the rest of the team filing through the rusted sheet metal doors of the garage. Xavier Wise and Pardus led the way with Disciple and Andrei behind them. The pair of Angolan bounty hunters were trailing at the back. Pardus came forward first and put a

hand on Logos's shoulder.

"We're all soldiers here," Pardus said, looking at the rest of the group. "We're all men - nothing divides us but race, religions, motherlands - imaginary boundaries that sever our empathy and understanding. What matters now is what we do today- fulfill General Jericho's mission and correct the mistakes that may have doomed this poor African nation. Right, Captain Wise?"

"Right," Xavier said, clearing his throat. "Saving Angola."

"Just like the movies," Pardus laughed, clapping Xavier's shoulder.

"We're brothers, men. Warriors. Heroes. We've got a mission to complete, and the time has come for exfil. Zosimus, Josef; join Stalker Force on their XR311. Andrei, Disciple; you'll be riding with Quad Equitum. As I understand it, we've got to keep a close eye on our odd-manout." "Odd man out?" Xavier repeated, glancing at Pardus. "The scientist," Pardus said. "He's the key to this mission." "Right," Disciple said. "Enough talking; let's move out!" The groups separated and clambered into their respective vehicles. Logos took the wheel of Quad Equitum's XR311 while Syd climbed into the driver's seat of Stalker Force's XR311. The vehicles growled like lions as their engines fired up; Molnar laughed and slapped the armored frame of Stalker Force's XR311 with the palm of his hand.

"Giddy-up, Kinane!"

The vehicles roared out of the garage, into the blazing sandstorm.

CHAPTER SIX- VIA REGIA

The sandstorm followed Stalker Force and Quad Equitum throughout their hours-long drive to New Fátima. Along the way they had drifted past deserted ghost towns, shanties constructed of rusted sheet metal, and former road checkpoints left abandoned amongst miles of parched scrubland. The only signs of human life along the way had been the occasional caravans of Ovimbundu refugees and the burnt skeletons of Portuguese military vehicles that lined the winding dirt road. Zosimus Kaikara had felt like an astronaut riding across a Martian hellscape as he sat in the passenger seat of the prototype XR311.

Zosimus and Josef Gustavo's former squadmates in the *Caçadores Especiais* had referred to Angola's ever-changing frontlines as '*the land at the end of the world*'. To the Portuguese Special Forces soldiers, the savannas and jungles of Angola had been an inhospitable realm of death where any nightmare could flourish. Most of the European-born Portuguese had little to no understanding of Angola's wildlife. They frequently paid for their ignorance with their lives. The multitude of rebel militias and their guerilla tactics stretched every soldier's mind to the breaking point with paranoia.

The land at the end of the world; Angola's merciless dark heart.

Zosimus had understood Angola's heart of darkness better than any of

his European compatriots in the *Caçadores Especiais*, the Special Hunters squadron. Zosimus earned the respect of his former squadmates for his natural understanding of the savannas and jungles of the Bié Plateau. No soldier was more suited to hunt the rebel militias and their leaders in the wilderness than the prodigal son of the mysterious *Onjoi* tribe. During Zosimus's fabled military career, he had neither seen nor heard anything of his former people.

Zosimus was afraid to think of what their fate had been.

After spending the past few years bounty hunting with Josef throughout Africa, Zosimus had managed to quell any memories of his motherland with the copious alcohol, drugs, and prostitutes that his bloodmoney could procure.

Zosimus preferred to be sober while hunting bounties with Josef, but after the first hour of the drive, Zosimus started digging through his paltry ruck-sack for his stash. A joint laced with opium had helped to dilute his senses for the following three hours. Zosimus had watched with numb disconnection as the features of the surrounding warzone evaporated like mirages within the ochre-red winds of the sandstorm. The voices of the other men onboard became a dissonant tone to Zosimus that was seamless with the roar of the XR311's engine.

Zosimus was dimly aware of Josef slapping his shoulder a few times while telling stories to James Molnar and Willard Bennington.

Zosimus dimly remembered that at one point Xavier Wise and Lalo Flores had gotten into a heated debate about the ethics of Che Guevara's intervention in other African countries caught in their own civil wars. Zosimus allowed their words to drift through his mind like a discordant chorus; empty noise devoid of meaning.

The only thing that had captured Zosimus's attention was when Syd Kinane, in the driver's seat, grabbed the bounty hunter's head and turned his face towards the side of the road. Zosimus could hear the American goliath laughing and saying things, but the only words that came to fruition in Zosimus's mind were, "...crispy critters, was what we called 'em in 'Nam."

Zosimus had felt time slow as his eyes fell upon the burnt remains of a family piled beneath an acacia tree. Their withered limbs were curled and twisted in rigor mortis, their skin scorched black by fire. Zosimus had watched as the slain family and the acacia were buried beneath fine red sediment in the world-consuming sandstorm. It was impossible to tell if the family had been of either indigenous or Portuguese descent; their racial distinctions had been erased by fire. Zosimus's opium high began to subside as the XR311's finally found their way out of the sandstorm. The arid wastelands gave way to a parched savanna, perforated by wiry-branched acacia trees topped with broad, flat canopies. Zosimus grumbled irritably as his stomach

roiled, seemingly folding inward with hunger. He reached into his tattered ruck sack and fished out a few sticks of springbok jerky, tearing into the salted meat with his yellowed canines. Syd took one stripout of Zosimus's hand and snapped it in half between his molars. "Thank ya kindly, bounty hunter," Syd mumbled through his grinding teeth. "Lay off the dope, now. It's bad enough we gotta worry about Molnar randomlyhallucinatin' on psychedelics without adding dope sickness to the mix."

"You couldn't tell I was tripping even if I told you," Molnar said.

"Si," Lalo said. "Molnar keeps it together, *hermano*."

"Jericho ain't payin' this African to get dopesick," Syd said, looking over his shoulder at the others. Hereached into Zosimus's rucksack with one hand while keeping his other hand on the steeringwheel.

"Got any more of that bush-meat jerky, boy?"

Zosimus grunted, "You've taken enough, American."

"Don't get political on me," Syd said. He pulled his hand out of Zosimus's rucksack and raised a bag of white powder for the others to see. Zosimus immediately grabbed for the pouch of cocaine, but Syd tossed it over his shoulder to Xavier. "See? Ain't stealin' if it's sharin'. Sharin' is carin', African."

Xavier leaned over the M2 Browning turret and caught the baggie of cocaine. He opened it, took a quick sniff, and jerked his head back sharply before throwing the bag to the wind. Zosimus sat up in the passenger seat and watched as the eight-ball was lost to the sand-swept scarpland. Zosimus grumbled and sat back in his seat, clenching his fists.

"Sorry, Zosimus," Xavier said. "No hard drugs."

Zosimus dismissed Xavier's sentiment with a wave of his hand. He stared across the fields of the plateau, to the tree-line of the miombo woodland on the southern horizon. The XR311 followed the dirt road towards the mosaic forest of blood-red petalled *delonix* and shaggy green *mutondo* trees. Once the vehicles entered the forest, it would only take minutes for them to reach the upper plateau of New Fátima. Zosimus dug into his ruck-sack and poured the last of his hashish into a hastily-rolled spliff.

"Pass some here, *irmão*," Josef said. "A fine welcome home."

"This isn't our home, *irmão*," Zosimus said. He lit the spliff, took a few puffs, and passed it back. Molnar took the joint after Josef had a few puffs, then passed it on to Xavier. Syd, Lalo, and Willard all declined to partake. When the thin reed of marijuana made it back to Zosimus, it was all but burnt down to its greasy tip. Zosimus flicked the smoldering roach to the wind and exhaled a sour cloud of smoke. He coughed, "I never thought dinosaur hunters would partake."

"We all have our own ways of calming our nerves," Xavier said,

clearing his throat. "Hell, I probably spent my first three years in Vietnam as high as a kite. It was all I could do to keep from going crazy with the Viet Cong always popping up out of nowhere. It could drive anybody mad."

"Hoo-uh," Syd grunted, scratching at his drooping moustache.

"Baby killers," Zosimus muttered, shaking his head. He watched as the canopy of the delonix trees swept overhead like the shredded remains of a red velvet curtain. The open air of the sparsely vegetated woodland seemed to glow phosphorescent crimson with the sunlight that shone through the bloody leaves laced overhead.

Zosimus craned his head out of the passenger window and saw Quad Equitum's XR311 trailing a dozen meters back, with Pardus manning the XM174 automatic grenade launcher. When Zosimus sat back in the passenger seat, he noticed that Syd was watching him from the corner of his eye.

"Call me a baby killer again," Syd growled. "Go on; do it." "I didn't mean any offense, American," Zosimus said. "I was just repeating what I overheard from that black man in Quad Equitum, 'Logos'. I don't know anything about Vietnam or this 'Tiger Force' you served with."

"Neither do I," Xavier said, staring down at Syd. He pivoted the Browning M2 turret to avoid catching a low-hanging branch with the rifle's barrel. "Enlighten us, Kinane. I've heard some rumors about Tiger Force, but I never knew you were involved with them."

"We're far from 'Nam, Captain," Willard said. "What's it matter?"

"It only matters if the rumors about Tiger Force are true," Xavier said. His voice seemed to be coming from the bottom of his throat, sieved to a rasping whisper. "Are they true, Kinane? What Tiger Force did back in Vietnam?"

Xavier watched his second in command expectantly. Syd tightened his thick fingers around the steering wheel and stared down the dirt road without speaking. His lips were pulled back in a pained grimace. Zosimus snapped his fingers a few times, but Syd didn't react. Xavier banged his fist against the rollbars over Syd's head and said, "I'm talking to you, Corporal. Give us the details."

"It's true," Syd said, barely audible over the XR311's engine. "You get the bloodiest guys from the infantry and get 'em trained by Special Forces, Green Beret like that boy 'Logos' in the car behind us. Get 'em all trained, call 'em Tiger Force, send 'em out to see if they're really as bloodthirsty as they seem. Like some sort of psy-ops experiment. See if the kill-to-death ratio changes when you get natural-born killers like me into the jungle just to do that – kill. That's Tiger Force."

"That's Uncle Sam for you," Molnar said. "Always playing around with the heads of his own men, seeing who can crack and who can't be

cracked. There's all kinds of examples of the military and the Pentagon fucking around with people they shouldn't have. Just look at me – MK Ultra Patient Zero.”

Xavier ignored Molnar. “So it's true, Kinane?”

“All of it,” Syd hissed through his teeth. The XR311 bounced on its shocks along the uneven dirt road, rumbling through rows of coppercolored *delonix* and black *sukwa* trees. The men on board were silent as they listened to the XR311's tires crunch over sand and gravel. Syd said, “I ain't saying more than I have to, and all I have to say is I didn't do nothing to nobody. We was left to our own devices for months with weak leadership, and we got carried away. We got a little too trigger-happy and some of the guys should've never been servin' to begin with, but they was drafted so that's the way it had to be.”

“Sounds like they were scared,” Willard said. “I would've been.”

“You don't know nothin' 'bout fear, Benny,” Syd grumbled. “You ain't seen nothin' like what some of them men in Tiger Force did. Stuff that ain't nobody in 'Nam ever seen. You ever seen a man cut the head off a baby, wear that head around his neck like a fuckin' medallion? That's the shit Jericho kept my record hidden for. Didn't want none of those rumors gettin' back to me. I ain't scared of shit 'cause I ain't never done nothin' like that. I ain't takin' the blame for what my old teammates did.”

“*Je...Jesus Christ*,” Willard murmured. “What did you just say?”

“You heard me, Benny,” Syd croaked. His eyes were unblinking, dry and biting from the sand filling the creases of his crow's feet. “I ain't had nothin' to do with no massacres; no civilians or nothin'. I ain't killed no babies and I ain't killed nobody that didn't deserve it. I was captured by Victor Charlie when I went AWOL from Tiger Force and got held captive until Xavier and the boys from Vulture Squad busted me out, back in '67. I ain't looked back since for a reason.”

“Goddamn,” Xavier exhaled. Lalo crossed himself.

“Men go crazy when they get scared,” Syd said. “Remember that.”

“Sound familiar, *irmão*?” Josef said, squeezing Zosimus's shoulder.

“Very familiar,” Zosimus muttered. His eyes rested upon the *Onjoi* baboon mask tattooed on his left forearm. “All too familiar. The only thing my father ever told me that wasn't a waste...all the old man ever cared about were stories of *Suku* and visions from Iboga. If I had been in his place, I would've never let another one of these baboons threaten my people in this worthless land at the end of the world.”

“Whatever any old man could ever say about war can't come close to explaining the fucking hell we went through back in 'Nam, what we did and saw in Tiger Force,” Syd grumbled. He braked as a herd of zebra filtered through the forest to cross the road. The engine of the

XR311 growled in a monotonous drone as parasitic insects filled the open cab of the vehicle. A family of chacma baboons climbed across the archway of burgundy-petalled branches woven over the XR311. Zosimus watched the primates pass as he kneaded the tattooed effigy on his forearm.

Syd cursed as he swat at mosquitoes and biting tsetse flies. “Nothin’ anybody can ever say can make you ready for living in a fucking nightmare, boy. Nothin’ no daddy can say to his son when the dreams run out and all that’s left is nightmares. Bein’ with Tiger Force, seein’ the things they did, the things *Ybarradid*, ain’t nothin’ come close to it in nothin’ other than night terrors. Get me, bounty hunter?”

“*Sim*,” Zosimus said. He was still watching the family of baboons. Willard muttered, “Who the fuck would kill a *baby*!”

“Mindless baboons,” Zosimus said, looking at Syd. “Scared apes.”

“Speak for yourself,” Syd grunted. “I ain’t scared of no monkeys.”

“Kinane...” Xavier drawled. “I’m warning you...”

Syd shrugged, looking away from Zosimus to watch the rest of the zebra pass. He gunned the engine and the XR311 lurched forward through the scattered sunlight sieved through the canopy. They followed the road to the end of the miombo woodland, where the path to the savanna beyond was framed by the lacey pink flowers of sapling *mufuti* trees. A family of wildebeest crossed the floral passage, their shaggy manes coated with the orange sand flurrying up from their hooves. Xavier fired a few rounds from the M2 Browning to hurry them along.

“Go on, git!” Molnar shouted after the wildebeest. “Git along now!” The XR311 suddenly bounced where it sat on the path, rocking back and forth on its shocks. Syd clutched the wheel and looked back to his Captain. Xavier swiveled the Browning M2 on its turret ring as he looked around the sparsely lit forest. The passengers in Quad Equitum’s XR311 were looking around as well; Pardus was staring down the barrel of the XM174 automatic grenade launcher. A second impact rocked the earth, and the trees seemed to momentarily buckle around the vehicles. The canopy was awash with movement like a sea of roiling red and green leaves.

Zosimus faced forward as Stalker Force’s XR311 edged through the flowers framing the end of the road, into the open savanna. The tree-line was positioned at the top of an escarpment that sloped sharply down to the rolling plains below. There was another concussive impact that shook the earth, and Zosimus was reminded of his time following elephants with the *Onjoi* tribe. He instinctively looked to where he had felt the source of the vibration, and he became paralyzed with shock.

“*Suku*,” Zosimus gasped, shaking his head. “*Nyoho...Ongongo...*”

“Look at it, *irmão!*” Josef cheered, tears in his eyes. “*Magnífico!*” Zosimus’s eyes traced the columns of a tremendous dinosaur’s legs, stretching higher than the acacia trees that dotted the plateau. He had to lean back and crane his neck just to see past the sauropod’s mottled, leathery shoulders to the sand-white and russet spirals painted along the length of its stiff, tree-trunk neck. The animal’s reptilian head towered fifty feet over the XR311, hovering within the center of the sun like a diminutive pupil encased in an iris of blinding gold.

Zosimus gasped as the giraffatitan crooned to the heavens. ANIMUS INDIVIDUATION PHASE II THE MAN OF ADVENTURE

“The second archetype of Animus development is the mythic Man of Adventure. By opening the heart to the wonders of the world, the Animus evolves into the spirit of explorers, swashbucklers, and pioneers.”

– Dr. Bruno Moreno

“Your vision will become clear only when you can look into your own heart. Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakes.”

– Carl G. Jung

“I’ve been all over the world and I’ve seen everything but hell, and I guess I’ll see that soon.”

– Carl Panzram

“We’re running out of time...the colliders are all being sabotaged simultaneously...the doomsday clock is ticking...”

– Captain Bruno Moreno

CHAPTER SEVEN– ONDELE

The mid-day sky above the savanna was as crisp and richly blue as polished sapphire, without a single blemishing cloud to dilute the morning sun’s enriching rays. The men inside of the XR311 stared in silent stupefaction as the lone giraffatitan used its tongue to pluck leaves from the lower branches of a five-story tall baobab tree. The sauropod was standing only a dozen meters away from the drab beige vehicles, purring from deep within its voluminous chest as chewed. Zosimus Kaikara could scarcely believe his eyes; he had seen footage of the dinosaurs from Vietnam, but never in the flesh. Never this colossal.

“*Suku,*” Zosimus whispered involuntarily. “*Suku, osande-*”

“Andrei,” Xavier Wise said into his walkie talkie. “Recognize this?”

"It's like a huge amargasaurus," Willard Bennington whispered. "Close," Andrei Wynn's voice buzzed from Xavier's walkie talkie. "It's a sauropod, but nothing like the amargasaurus we found in Vietnam. This is a giraffatitan...a close relative of brachiosaurus. I can't even begin to guess how many tons of vegetation an animal like this would have to eat on a daily basis just to stay alive. *Cyka bylat*, it's bigger than a damned building."

"Look down," Syd Kinane said. "There's more downhill."

"More of these things?" Josef Gustavo said. He squeezed his head out through the roll bars that covered the bed of the XR311. "How many more are there?"

"Not long-necks," Syd said. "Other herbivores."

Zosimus stood up in the passenger seat and leaned over the bulletproof windshield. He looked down the thorn brush-tangled escarpment to the basin of the savanna. Amongst the numerous narrow-trunked acacia and zebrawood trees were dozens of dinosaurs of all different shapes, sizes and species. First he saw the maiasaura; thirty-foot long duck-billed dinosaurs that looked like hairless horses with thick tails. Their mottled pink flesh was covered in deep-red stripes that resembled healed scar tissue. The maiasaura adults were almost twice as large as the elephants that were foraging with their herd.

A flock of squamous green psittacosaurus strode through the golden grass between the spacious acacia trees from which the elephants, giraffes, and maiasaura were feeding. The dog-sized bipedal psittacosaurus had parrot-like beaks and long, keratinous spikes projecting from each corner of their square heads. Whenever one of the psittacosaurus stopped to forage, they would drop on all fours and raise their quilled tails high in the air. If a curious chacma baboon drew too close, the psittacosaurus would flex the needle-tipped quills in a defensive posture.

Zosimus watched as several psittacosaurus hopped and chattered around the base of a zebrawood tree where a duck-billed maiasaura was feeding. The maiasaura stood upright on its hind legs, using its forelimbs to support its own weight against the slender white trunk. The psittacosaurus were squalling and jumping on their hind legs as they fought to catch the shredded leaves falling from the maiasaura's curved duck-bill.

"Ankylosaurus," Willard said, pointing over Zosimus's shoulder. "See that, the big one that looks like a turtle? Those were always my favorite as a kid."

Zosimus looked downhill and saw the ankylosaurus facing off with a lone rhino in the shade of a gargantuan baobab tree. The ankylosaurus's armored back was a blend of yellow and red, streaked

with shining black stripes. Sharp arrowhead-shaped scutes protruded from the sides of the ankylosaurus's angular head and ran in rows along its flanks. Zosimus watched as the ankylosaurus's tail swung through the air. The bony club at the end of the ankylosaurus's tail pounded the earth like a mallet as the rhino stamped its feet and brayed. Xavier sighed and rubbed his forehead.

"Goddamn dinosaurs," Xavier muttered. "God damn them all."

Willard said, "There's enough for a breeding population, sir."

"Burn 'em all," Syd grunted. "Napalm the fuckers."

"It didn't work with the utahraptors," James Molnar said, reaching through the roll bar to squeeze Syd's shoulder. "You can't erase every problem with fire, Kinane. I think we already learned that the hard way with Xipetotec."

Josef frowned. "What the hell is a *sheepah-toe-teck*?"

"The goddamned devil," Syd said. "That's what."

"It's a long story, *amigo*," Lalo Floressaid. "Four years, too long."

The cold voice of the CIA agent, Disciple, buzzed from Xavier's walkie talkie. "We're going to have to pass through these herds and get to the lower savanna basin. The southern end of the plateau terminates in a downhill slope; at the bottom of the slope is a cliff. On the west end of the cliff, there's a ridge road cut from the rock wall. We follow the road down into the savanna basin below the plateau, straight to the collider. Copy that?"

"Roger that," Xavier drawled. "Take it slow, Kinane."

Syd eased the XR311 down the hill, carefully steering around half-buried boulders and amorphous coils of thorn brush. Quad Equitum's XR311 followed several meters behind, with Logos smoking a cigarillo at the wheel. Zosimus let his arm hang out of the passenger window to feel the dry feather grass brush along his palm. The XR311 bounced over a rut in the slope, and a terrified psittacosaurus burst from the grass, leaping past his hand. Zosimus quickly jumped back in his seat, raising his G3 assault rifle.

Syd laughed. "The African's scared of a lil birdie."

"Don't feel bad, Zosimus," Molnar said with a grin. "Kinane's terrified of Xipetotec. Just talking about that utahraptor gives the big guy nightmares. I'm pretty sure he's got shell shock from our last run-in with the half-cooked bird. Still pisses in his sleeping bag from the nightmares."

"Quiet, beatnik," Syd grunted. "I ain't scared, and I ain't no pisser."

"Tell the story," Josef said. "What's Xipetotec?"

"Not *what*," Molnar said, raising his index finger. "*Whom*."

"Xipetotec isn't a person, Molnar," Xavier said. "It's just another utahraptor...a really smart utahraptor, but an animal nonetheless. I don't know why we ever let you name the damn thing."

Zosimus grunted, "You named a dinosaur?"

"Had to," Xavier said. "Xipetotec was the alpha male of the utahraptor colony that escaped Vulture Valley; the quarantine zone in Vietnam where all of the dinosaurs came from. We tried to nail the bastard and his colony with napalm back in Laos, in the Annamite Mountain range, but he managed to escape capture in the abandoned Viet Cong tunnels, the *Ho Chi Minh Trail*. From there the 'raptors were able to spread."

"Like trying to pick a damn termite out of a plantation house," Syd grumbled. He pulled the XR311 around a dozing ankylosaurus as the vehicle touched down on the plateau. "Xipetotec nearly killed me and Molnar both when we called the air strike to kill him, but the bastard still got away. The raptor's gotten away every goddamned time we get close to him."

"What's the worry?" Josef said. "Just another 'raptor, right?"

"The DM-10 plague started with Xipetotec," Xavier said. "Back when he was in the Annamite Mountains, Xipetotec only had DM-9. We had only found nine variations of the original Dromaeosauridae Mutagen. DM-10 only sprang up after Xipetotec left the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Andrei thinks the Dromaeosauridae Mutagen made its tenth mutation in those tunnels. God knows, Kinane can tell ya how nasty those tunnels were."

"All kinds of disease," Syd said. He spat out through the open window. "Filthy, nasty Victor Charlie camping out with rats and shitting in buckets. I'm surprised the 'raptor didn't come out with goddamn bubonic plague on top of DM-10."

"So why give Xipetotec a name?" Josef asked.

Xavier pivoted in the turret ring, spinning the M2 Browning around so it was facing Quad Equitum's XR311 behind them. Logos was cautiously steering the drab armor-plated vehicle around a grazing maiasaura and its toddling infants. Xavier watched Pardus as he said to Josef, "It's easier to identify the animals by call-signs. The utahraptors, from what we've observed in the field, are easily among the smartest animals to have ever lived. Maybe even smarter than some primates..."

"How?" Josef asked. He raised an eyebrow over his golden aviators and motioned to the dinosaurs grazing throughout the sun-washed plain. "These things seem to be as dumb as any other animals here. I know a lion can be smart, and leopards are trickier than most, but nothing comes close to being as smart as a man or ape."

"Except Xipetotec," Xavier said, smiling grimly.

"Pray to god you never see a utahraptor," Willard said, looking at Josef. "But if you see Xipetotec, he's half-burnt from when Molnar and Syd tried to call that napalm strike on the 'raptor. Most of his feathers

are gone, and where there aren't feathers there's just burnt, ugly scar tissue. If we so much as see him or any of the *citrinitas* utahraptors, we can assume they have DM10...and I don't know if you'll be immune like us."

"What determines immunity?" Josef asked. "What's 'sen-trentas?'"

"Citrinitas is a name for a subgroup of utahraptors," Xavier said.

"There have been four subgroups, all divergent micro-colonies that were once part of Xipetotec's original colony from 'Nam. The only differences between the subgroups are coloration and behavior. The Citrinitas are a blend of yellows, browns, and blacks. They fit in perfectly in environments like this. We last saw them in Zaire, but we don't know where they are now."

"How could they get here from Vietnam?" Zosimus asked.

Xavier's tired and weary eyes betrayed his calm façade. "The 'raptors, uh, always find a way...even if it means crossing every forest, mountain, river and desert they come across. The utahraptors are the smartest animals I've ever met outside of the military, and Xipetotec has to be the smartest of them all. As far as immunity goes; it's one in three. One in three people are immune. We haven't figured out how, other than inherited genetics."

Josef frowned. "So if Xipetotec is here...we might get infected?"

"It's possible," Xavier said. "But I doubt he's here. There might have been other diseases brought to this land by the dinosaurs we're seeing now, but only time will tell. As far as DM10 goes, you're safe so long as you don't run into Xipetotec or his colony. If you do, and if you aren't immune, symptoms take a few weeks to show up. By then, it's too late. You'll either fight through it or you'll die."

"What are the symptoms?" Zosimus asked.

The tires of the XR311 chewed through the dry loudetia grass and caused plumes of sandy brown detritus to cloud over the vehicle. Xavier coughed and took a swig from his canteen. "The symptoms aren't pretty. First comes an attack on the digestive tract; diarrhea and projectile vomiting. After a week of that, paralysis sets in. Delirium kicks in within days of paralysis. Painful, pussy blisters will start appearing all over the body – and I mean *all over* – and death usually follows shortly after. It's easiest to compare it to a nerve agent."

Zosimus and Josef blanched. Dust entered their open mouths.

"That's *if* Xipetotec and his utahraptors show up," Xavier said. "For all we know, there could be a new colony of utahraptors from this collider, with all different kinds of diseases. Hell, half the animals here probably have viruses and pathogens that science doesn't even have names for yet. We would rather do this work in hazmat suits, but it's counterintuitive. We're basically canaries in a coal mine."

Zosimus sat back in his seat, shaking his head. His mind was reeling;

he felt like jumping out of the XR311. He would rather walk back to Kuito and risk being butchered by the rebel militias along the way than chance dying of some horrific saurian disease. Zosimus looked out the open passenger window and watched the maiasaura and ankylosaurus rubbing shoulders with elephants and water buffalo beneath spindly acacia trees. He decided it would be better to stay with the dinosaur hunters and not go AWOL.

Josef lowered the aviators an inch down the bridge of his nose and stared over the golden frames at Xavier. He tucked a cigarette between his lips and lit it with a match, taking a long drag. After releasing the smoke in a pallid cloud he said, "We're going to need more compensation for our work, *chefe*. Hazard pay. Pardus never mentioned anything to *meu irmão* or I about this disease."

"Take it up with him," Xavier said with a shrug. He pivoted the M2 Browning around on the turret ring so he was facing forward again, looking across the savanna to the sheer drop at the edge of the plateau. "I imagine he never mentioned working around dinosaurs when he first contacted you, either, did he?"

Zosimus and Josef shook their heads in unison.

"Figures," Xavier said. "Hold the intel until the mission debriefing."

"Like any good mystery," Molnar said. "All shall come to light."

"Yeah, like whether or not the African and the European are gonna be shittin' blood in two weeks," Syd chuffed. "They'll solve that mystery in no time, if they get out of here alive."

"Quit being a prick, Kinane," Xavier said. He reached down and slapped the helmet off of Syd's head, spilling his golden locks down to his shoulders. Syd grabbed the helmet in one hand and dropped it back onto his head without acknowledging Xavier.

"I'm African, too, *amigo*," Josef said to Syd. "I haven't even seen my ancestor's motherland, back in Europe. I've never left Africa."

"My name is Zosimus Kaikara," Zosimus grunted. "Not 'African'."

"Fair enough, boys," Syd said. "Like Pardus said; we're all equals out here. Not worth it to get tied up in identity politics when we're in the brush with all the lizards and man-eating birds god ever dreamt up in his good grace."

Zosimus looked at his partner, but Josef merely shrugged and flicked his cigarette out to the parched prairie. The men were silent for a beat, listening to the groans and trumpeting vocalizations of the newly melded ecosystem of mammalian and saurian creatures. Both sides of the field were hemmed in by the encroaching tree-line of the miombo woodlands. It was impossible for Zosimus to see into the shadows that were entrenched beneath the jungle canopy.

Andrei Wynn's voice buzzed through Xavier's walkie talkie.

"Theropods coming in from the west, three o'clock. Looks like some

carnotaurus; abelisaurid's originally from South America."

Zosimus looked to the right and went rigid; a large bipedal dinosaur had emerged from the jungle without making a sound. The creature walked on long, muscular hindlimbs similar to the legs of an ostrich. The carnotaurus's snaking body was covered in thorny scutes like shards of glistening ruby. The animal's arms were laughably small; as small as a human toddler's arms; without any visible elbows. A pair of sharp horns protruded over the carnotaurus's hooded eyes. The carnotaurus was over twenty feet long and almost twelve feet tall, with a blunt snout brimming with serrated teeth.

"Pick up the speed, Kinane," Xavier said.

The XR311's gained momentum across the rough earth, bouncing over ditches and ruts, slamming down hard on their tires every time they touched down onto even terrain. Xavier and Pardus aimed their turrets at the lone carnotaurus as the vehicles swerved around the pale spires of acacia and zebrawood trees. The carnotaurus began to move at a fast trot, weaving around the tree trunks as easily as a striding cassowary. Zosimus raised his G3 assault rifle and aimed it at the rapidly approaching carnivore.

The carnotaurus's muscles bulged beneath its scaly red hide with each swift footstep. The animal's blunt snout was spread in a panting smile. Saliva trailed from its fangs, streaking back like syrupy ribbons in the wind. Smaller herbivorous dinosaurs, bird-like hypsilophodon and psittacosaurus, sprang out of the way of the charging carnivore.

Zosimus watched through the iron sights of his G3 assault rifle as the carnotaurus ducked its head and rammed its horns through one of the hypsilophodon, flinging the mangled herbivore into the open air.

"Another carnotaurus," Xavier shouted. "Nine o'clock!"

Zosimus turned and saw another carnotaurus bounding a few meters behind Quad Equitum's XR311. Both of the carnotaurus were startlingly fast, easily keeping pace with the rushing vehicles. Zosimus glanced at the odometer and saw that they were pushing forty miles per hour.

"Faster, Kinane," Xavier barked through the wind.

"Can't," Syd said. He spun the steering wheel to avoid hitting a cluster of rocky red termite mounds. "This shit-box might be able to get up to eighty miles per hour, but none of y'all will be sitting in the bed if we go past forty."

"They're flanking us," Lalo shouted from the bed. "*Andale, amigo!*"

Xavier and Pardus aimed their turrets at the carnotaurus that were galloping astride the XR311s. The rest of the men in the vehicles kept their weapons level with the striding theropods. Zosimus looked ahead and saw the end of the plain, where the plateau dropped away to an escarpment. If they went at this speed over the edge, they would likely

go rolling to the end of the plateau, possibly over the cliff and into the lower savanna basin. Everybody would surely die if they didn't slow down.

The XR311's drove through the last of the acacia trees dotting the plain and roared towards the edge of the plateau. The pair of carnotaurs were keeping pace just a few meters behind the vehicles. Pardus aimed his XM174 automatic grenade launcher at the carnotaurs striding alongside Quad Equitum's XR311. The carnotaurs hooked its horns through the turret ring, ripping the weapon away with a twist of its neck. Pardus merely leaned away from the animal's swinging horns as the other mercenaries opened fire from the bed of the XR311.

Zosimus stared wide-eyed as the carnotaurs took the barrage of automatic firepower without losing a step in its stride. The hail of bullets merely ricocheted off of the animal's armor-plated body. Whatever ammunition that managed to penetrate its hide did nothing to slow the creature down. The carnotaurs swung its sharpened horns along the side of the XR311, scraping the vehicle's flak plating. Zosimus was stunned; he had never seen an animal attack a military vehicle; not even during the War for Independence.

Zosimus was startled from his thoughts when Xavier's M2 Browning let loose with a droning roar of belt-fed firepower. The .50 caliber shells penetrated the body of the carnotaurs chasing Stalker Force's XR311 and the animal tripped over its own long legs. The carnotaurs went rolling across the earth with the ear-splitting *crack* of a broken femur. Xavier continued to lay heavy fire onto the animal as he pivoted around in the turret ring, hot shell casings dancing around his feet. "We got trouble!" Syd barked. "Captain Wise, 12 o'clock!"

Zosimus looked forward to the edge of the plateau as Xavier rotated the M2 Browning around the turret ring. Further ahead was a third carnotaurs, an alpha male with foot-long keratin-sheathed horns sticking out from either side of its head. The alpha male was more muscular and robust than the female or beta male, with crimson and orange scales gleaming like red-hot iron against the cerulean sky. Zosimus screamed as the XR311 barreled head-on towards the charging predator.

Zosimus was beginning to regret not going AWOL.

CHAPTER EIGHT- KATABASIS

Andrei Wynn clung tightly to his seatbelt in Quad Equitum's XR311 as the vehicle sped across the savanna to the end of the plateau. The female carnotaurs pursuing them spread its jaws and bellowed as Eros and Pardus fired their rifles from the back of the XR311. Thanatos angled his shotgun out through the roll cage covering the vehicle's bed and fired a slug into the pale animal's shoulder. The

female carnotaurus barked in pain and veered away without losing her footing on the uneven plain.

Disciple shouted from the bed, "Slow down, Logos!"

"Can't," Logosshouted. "The fucker behind us is too close!"

Across the clearing, Stalker Force's XR311 was churning through the loudetia grass to avoid the alpha male carnotaurus. Xavier opened fire with the M2 Browning machine gun, dumping lead around the feet of the circling male. Andrei watchedas Stalker Force's XR311 spun around the carnotaurus and shot past, back towards the end of the plateau. Both vehicles were rushing towards the edge with the alpha male and female carnotaurus only meters behind. Logos was sweating and swearing beneath his breath as he drove over the edge of the escarpment.

The ground suddenly dropped away beneath the XR311.

"Hold on!" Logos hollered.

Quad Equitum's XR311 leapt over the hill top, flying through showering rays of sunlight with its drab hood penetrating the pristine blue sky. As the front of the XR311 bowed to the earth, Andrei saw several things in what seemed to be slow-motion. At the bottom of the hill was the end of the savanna, dropping away at the cliff's edge to the canopy of the miombo forest below. To the far right was the ridge road, which had been carved from the rocky face of a buttress. A dilapidated guard outpost was positioned at the head of the ridge road.

On the far left of the clearing, there was a single acacia tree with a wide, flat-topped canopy. Andrei felt his stomach plummet as his eyes fell upon the gargantuan form of a fifty-foot long theropod sleeping in the shade of the tree. Andrei immediately recognized it as a carcharodontosaurus; one of the largest carnivorous dinosaurs to ever walk the earth. The animal was snoring beside a maiasaura carcass that was covered in vultures.

"Look out," Andrei screamed. "That Goliath-"

Quad Equitum's XR311 slammed onto its tires at the bottom of the escarpment and immediately bounced a meter into the air. Andrei's head caromed off of the dashboard and pain flared throughout his skull. The vehicle tilted back in the air and slammed down again, this time more forcefully. The men in the bed of the XR311 shouted and flailed as they fought to hold onto the roll-bars. Andrei vomited on the floor of the cab, trembling all over and dizzy with nauseous fear. Blood drained down his face from where his scalp had been split open. Quad Equitum's XR311 was barreling down the rough-hewn earth towards the slumbering Goliath. The carcharodontosaurus resembled a Tyrannosaurus rex, but larger and more lithely muscular, with triangular jaws and longer forelimbs. A black cloud of flies were

swirling around its five-foot long, bloodstained maw. The carcharodontosaurus's hide was the same texture and color of lava rock, with blazing stripes like veins of emergent magma rising through its skin. The Goliath groaned and blinked, stirring in the shade of the acacia tree as the XR311 rocketed down the escarpment.

"Slow down, Logos!" Disciple cried.

"No," Pardusbarked. "Cut to the right - get to the road!"

"Brake," Andrei shrieked. "Brake!"

"Everybody *shut up, goddammit*," Logos howled. He pumped the brake pedal to no avail. Logos's typically calm demeanor quickly transitioned to one of slack-jawed horror as he fought to slow the runaway vehicle. The cigarillo flew from his lips and bounced off of Thanatos's face with a flurry of sparking embers. Logos cried out, "The brakes" Quad Equitum's XR311 struck the bottom of the scarp on its front axle with a horrific *bang*, jolted into the air, and finally crashed down onto its tires several meters from the acacia tree. A great cloud of orange grit blossomed from the XR311's grinding tires. The Goliath rose to its feet, standing so tall that its row of dorsal spikes cut through the underside of the acacia tree's canopy. The Goliath's jaws distended into a booming roar, a sound so powerful and voluminous that it filled the plateau and reverberated throughout the forested foothills beyond.

"Logos," Disciple screamed. "Hit the brakes!"

"*The brakes are fucking shot*," Logos cried. He pumped uselessly at the brake pedal as the XR311 lurched through the tilled earth and careened like a stray bullet towards the carcharodontosaurus. Logos swung the XR311 around the muscular legs of the Goliath, cutting the wheel towards the ridge road. Eros and Thanatos laughed and whooped from the backseat. Disciple was holding a hand to his heart, clinging to the roll bars in the bed beside them. The carcharodontosaurus roared as it gave chase, stretching its jaws to hook the rear fender in its teeth.

"You got it, mate," Thanatos said, pointing to the road. "We got it!" Logos laughed, slapping the wheel.

Stalker Force's XR311 suddenly leapt down the escarpment, the M2 Browning roaring back at the carcharodontosaurus. Xavier tore at the Goliath's hide with a steady stream of .50 caliber ammunition. The carcharodontosaurus barked and planted its feet in the arid soil, turning to face the new aggressor. The long, coal-black tail of the Goliath swung around and struck the rear-end of Quad Equitum's XR311, sending the vehicle into the air.

Andrei squeezed his seatbelt and shrieked as the sky and the savanna spun into a sickening cyclone around the vehicle. The sun was suddenly beneath them, and the ground rose to catch the vehicle by

its rollbars. The XR311 crashed upside-down and continued to roll across the plateau. Fragments of glass from the windshield slashed Andrei's body as clods of dirt and uprooted turf bounced off of his face. The last thing that Andrei saw was the forest canopy below the plateau, reaching up with the branches of baobab trees to catch the falling XR311.

The men onboard screamed as they plummeted off of the cliff.

"San La Muerte," Lalo Flores whispered.

Stalker Force's XR311 was idling on the left-hand side of the plateau, hiding from the carcharodontosaurus behind the lone acacia tree in the clearing. Zosimus Kaikara was leaning out of his seat, holding onto the roll-bars for support. They had watched Quad Equitum's XR311 careen off of the plateau in stupefied silence. The carcharodontosaurus swung its head over the cliff edge, bellowing at the tree tops below that had swallowed its prey.

"They're done for," Josef Gustavo said. *"Descanse em paz."* "Game over, man," James Molnar muttered. "Fucking game over." "We'll find them, dead or alive," Xavier Wise said. "Kinane, get

us around that Goliath. Take us down the ridge road and we'll find them in the forests below."

"There's no way," Zosimus said. "We have to find another route."

"We don't have the time or luxury for other options," Xavier said.

"Andrei and the others could be dead or bleeding out down in that jungle for all we know. Kinane; get us around that Goliath and I'll try to keep fire on it. Maybe some ammunition to the ankles will make it keep its distance."

"That Goliath's a monster," Zosimus said. "Don't be a fool." "It's just an animal, Zosimus," Xavier said. "Drive, Kinane!"

The carcharodontosaurus sauntered around the acacia tree, curling its neck around the thin trunk. The Goliath's eyes narrowed as it glimpsed the men in the bed of the XR311 through the roll-bars. Hot, fecund wind escaped through the Goliath's fangs as its lips pulled back in a lecherous snarl. Syd was sweating and shaking as he gunned the engine.

The carcharodontosaurus ducked around the acacia and roared, kicking up plumes of grass and sand as it chased after the XR311. Syd Kinane clutched the wheel, putting the gas pedal all the way to the floor. The vehicle practically leapt over the low ruts and grooves of the earth, bouncing across the clearing towards the ridge road. Xavier fired the M2 Browning at the Goliath's snout, forcing the carcharodontosaurus to slow its pace.

"*God-dammit*," Syd hollered. "More lizards!"

Zosimus looked ahead and saw that the two surviving carnotaurs had returned; they were standing between Stalker Force's XR311 and the ridge road. The pair of carnotaurs bellowed and sprinted head-on towards the vehicle. Syd slammed on the brakes and the XR311 veered away from the two carnotaurs, fish-tailing back towards the hill they had originally descended from. Zosimus heard a roar and looked to his left; the Goliath's cindered snout was rushing towards Syd's door.

The Goliath's head crashed into the side of Stalker Force's XR311, sending the vehicle rolling across the clearing to the two carnotaurs. Zosimus screamed as he was thrown from the vehicle and into the open air. He saw the sun between his legs, swinging overhead, before landing on his back on the embankment. Zosimus was knocked unconscious; momentum rolled his limp body further uphill. After coming to a stop flat on his back, Zosimus awoke with a gasp and bolted upright.

Zosimus looked downhill and saw Stalker Force's XR311 lying crumpled in the grass at the bottom of the embankment. The carcharodontosaurus and the two carnotaurs were facing each other

from across the overturned vehicle. The trio of theropods were having a standoff, roaring and stamping their thunderous feet as they edged closer to the XR311. Zosimus saw Syd and Lalo scurrying out, dragging Molnar and Willard Bennington with them.

Zosimus took out a grenade, pulled the pin, and lobbed it over the horned scalps of the carnotoaurus. The grenade bounced into the tin shelter at the head of the ridge road and erupted, throwing the rusted sheet metal high into the air. The pair of carnotoaurus barked in surprise and turned towards the explosion, facing away from the carcharodontosaurus.

The carcharodontosaurus sprang forward and slammed its jaws over the neck of the alpha male carnotoaurus. The Goliath dragged the smaller, howling carnivore through the dirt as blood jettisoned from its retching jaws. The carcharodontosaurus bit down on the carnotoaurus's neck, crushing the cervical vertebrae like talc. The female carnotoaurus ran headfirst into the Goliath's hip, but the theropod's horns did little more than bruise the carcharodontosaurus's flesh. The Goliath dropped the bull carnotoaurus to the sandy clearing and howled at the antagonistic female.

Zosimus took the opportunity and sprinted downhill, swinging his G3 assault rifle overhead as he hopped over the uneven terrain. He carefully danced around the stomping feet of the carcharodontosaurus as the larger carnivore raked its foreclaws through the malecarnotoaurus's spine. The female carnotoaurus howled and barked with impotent fury and desperation; there was nothing she could do to stop the Goliath from butchering her mate. Zosimus ducked behind the XR311 as the carcharodontosaurus released its jaws from the malecarnotoaurus's neck.

The carcharodontosaurus lifted its head and roared back at the female carnotoaurus, flexing its freshly reddened talons. The Goliath took a step towards the female, placing his wide foot on her writhing mate's neck. The carcharodontosaurus bared its teeth and growled as the talons on its foot dragged ragged wounds through the malecarnotoaurus's throat. Zosimus heard the female carnotoaurus shriek from the other side of the XR311; the tormented animal sounded like a woman being penetrated by a dagger.

Zosimus's heart was hammering as he peered over the overturned XR311's lazily spinning tires. The Goliath's burning eyes glanced at Zosimus; the bounty hunter quickly dropped to his knees and scrambled inside of the XR311. Josef was lying unconscious across the bars of the roll cage. Zosimus dragged Josef towards the open door and peered outside, to check if the coast was clear.

The Goliath carcharodontosaurus threw the female carnotoaurus to the ground a meter from the open driver-side door of the XR311. Zosimus

had to cover his ears as the thrashing carnivore caterwauled in pain. Josef remained unconscious in his partner's arms as the female carnotaurus brayed and swung her head against the XR311, rocking the vehicle. The Goliathbit down on the female carnotaurus's neck and tore her head from her body. The beheaded female kicked in the throes of death beneath the carcharodontosaurus. Hot arterial blood sprayed into the XR311, misting Zosimus's body as he dragged Josef away.

The kicking of the slain carnotaurus ceased. Everything was silent for a few seconds; Zosimus listened to the Goliath's labored breathing. He could hear the blood of the female carnotaurus draining through the carcharodontosaurus's teeth, pattering upon the metal undercarriage of the XR311. Zosimus could only see the Goliath's taloned feet through the shattered windshield. The carcharodontosaurus was waiting; listening and sniffing for the prey that it knew had once been inside of the crushed vehicle. Zosimus held his G3 assault rifle as tightly as his breath as the rumbling respirations of the Goliath trembled through his bones.

The carcharodontosaurus trudged away, retreating to the acacia tree. Zosimus slowly exhaled as the Goliath laid down in the shade.

Xavier's walkie talkie crackled outside. "CAPTAIN WISE-"

Zosimus jumped and started crawling around the XR311, searching for the walkie-talkie. He stuck his head out of the XR311 and looked across the clearing to the acacia tree. The carcharodontosaurus didn't seem to notice the static from the walkie-talkie; it was studying the scavenged remains of the maiasaura carcass. Zosimus assumed the Goliath would be on the hunt again soon.

Zosimus narrowed his eyes as he listened to the distant breathing of the carcharodontosaurus. He thought he could hear somebody groaning outside. Very slowly, Zosimus crept back to the driver-side door and looked out through the crumpled window frame. The Goliath stopped sniffing the fly-covered maiasaura remains and lifted its head to look across the clearing. The Goliath's burning eyes settled onto the XR311 and Zosimus immediately ducked back into the crumpled vehicle.

Zosimus climbed out through the passenger door and crawled around the XR311 until he found Xavier. The captain of Stalker Force was still in the turret, but because of the way the vehicle had landed, he had been pinned in place. The iron turret ring that the M2 Browning had been mounted to was clamped shut aroundXavier's torso like a triggered bear trap. Zosimus could see dark, wet stains soaking throughXavier's fatigues.

Zosimus put a hand on the captain's shoulder. Xavier suddenly awoke with a violent howl of pain, grasping at his mangled abdomen.

Zosimus sprang forward and clapped his hand over Xavier's mouth. Xavier continued to bellow through Zosimus's palms the Goliath's footsteps slowly thundered towards them. Zosimus slapped Xavier in the side of the head and the captain's screams of pain dropped to a wheezing gasp.

"What-what-where" Xavier stammered. His head lolled back and he moaned. The footsteps of the approaching carcharodontosaurus caused the XR311 to vibrate in a steady rhythm. Xavier grabbed Zosimus by the shoulder and pulled him close. Blood oozed through the captain's gnashing teeth.

"Get-get outof here," Xavier rasped. "*Hurry.*"

"Comeon," Zosimus said. He wrappedhis arms around Xavier's abdomen, just above the clamped turret ring. Zosimus pulled and Xavier screamed sharply. The Goliath carcharodontosaurus grunted in response from the other side of the XR311. Xavier locked eyes with Zosimus and squeezed his shoulder.

"Follow Pardus," Xavier wheezed. "*Watch Pardus.*"

Zosimus stared at Xavier, trying to make sense of his words.

"Hurry," Xavier choked, wincing in pain. "*Run!*"

Zosimus scrambled away from Xavier as the carcharodontosaurus circled the XR311. Zosimus crawled inside the vehicle and grabbed Josef by the collar of his bloodied shirt. He froze as the muscular black hind-limb of the carcharodontosaurus swung past the open driver-side door. Once the Goliath had passed, Zosimus quickly dragged Josef outside, back beneath the burning sun.

Zosimus carried Josef away from the XR311 and the carcharodontosaurus, towards Stalker Force's position at the edge of the cliff. The men had their rifles aimed at the Goliath. When Molnar and Lalo saw Zosimus approaching, they ran over to help. Lalo helped Zosimus to carry Josef while Molnar kept his automatic SOW shotgun aimed at the Goliath. The carcharodontosaurus was ignoring the men, sniffing around the overturned XR311.

"Wise," Lalo said to Zosimus. "Where's Captain Wise?"

A clattering rose from behind the XR311. The carcharodontosaurus grumbled as it looked from the vehicle to Stalker Force, then back to the source of the percussive metal rattling. Xavier was holding down the trigger of the unloaded M2 Browning, but the ammunition belt lay just beyond his grasping fingertips. If he could just feed the belt through...

The carcharodontosaurus took a few plaintive steps around the XR311, cocking its head as it studied the crumpled vehicle.

TheGoliath's jaws opened and a low, rumbling growl sifted through its bloodied teeth. The Goliath's tongue slipped out through its jaws and wriggled obscenely in the air, tasting the fresh blood on the wind.

Xavier grasped the ammunition belt with his trembling fingers. He watched as the carcharodontosaurus loomed over the XR311, blotting out the sun with the silhouette of its sky-encompassing body. The Goliath leaned onto the undercarriage of the vehicle and dragged its talons through the steel with a nerve-rending screech. Xavier could feel the hot, rancid breath of the carcharodontosaurus rushing over his paraplegic body. The blood of the slain carnotaurus ran down the length of the Goliath's squirming tongue, dripping thickly onto Xavier's face.

Xavier bellowed a defiant war-cry as he reloaded the M2 Browning. Zosimus looked over his shoulder from the edge of the plateau when he heard the *snap* of the ammunition belt being fed into the M2 Browning. The .50 caliber heavy machine gun fired with a quick scream of lead; the Goliath arched its head back and barked irritably as bullets skimmed across its snout. The roar of the M2 Browning was immediately silenced when the carcharodontosaurus slammed its jaws over Xavier's upper body.

"*Captain Wise!*" Willard screamed. He leapt to his feet and ran out into the clearing, but Zosimus pulled the rookie back and pushed him into Syd's arms.

"Run," Zosimus snapped. "We have to find Pardus!"

Zosimus glanced over his shoulder and saw the Goliath jerking its head back, away from the XR311. The force of the Goliath's tugging pulled the mangled vehicle back onto its shredded tires. The Goliath turned to face Zosimus as hanging entrails dripped black and burgundy fluids from between its crooked fangs.

Xavier's lower body was still clamped in the turret ring; his legs were kicking, the boots knocking against the bed of the XR311 in a mindless beat. Zosimus and the surviving members of Stalker Force didn't wait to see the rest, choosing instead to scale the cliff-face buttress down to the forest below. The Goliath carcharodontosaurus didn't bother to pursue the men; it had Xavier's writhing upper body in its jaws.

Xavier was still alive when the Goliath swallowed him whole.

CHAPTER NINE– UNIO NATURALIS

The miombo woodland was spread like a sea of green velvet beneath Quad Equitum's plummeting XR311. Everybody onboard was howling and screaming with terror as the vehicle crashed belly-first through the upper-story canopy. Thick branches cracked and split beneath the heavily armored vehicle as it was dragged down by gravity. Logos and Andrei leaned away as broken tree limbs speared through the shattered windshield. Pardus and Disciple cowered in the bed with Eros and Thanatos as thick, waxy leaves engulfed the falling XR311.

"Mother Mary," Logos chanted, "Blessed art thou."

"Shit!" Disciple hollered. *"SHIIT!"*

The XR311 crash-landed across the widespread boughs of a towering baobab tree. The sudden halt in inertia caused the men in the bed of the vehicle to slam down flat against the floor. Broken baobab branches speared through the floor around Logos and Andrei's boots. The two men looked from the splintered protrusions to one another, their jaws slack in shock. Logos let out a deep breath and began to chuckle involuntarily. He threw his head back and howled with laughter until the XR311 shifted lower. Andrei pulled his feet up onto the seat as the broken branches crept higher with a screech of scraped metal.

Pardus craned his head over the tail-end of the XR311 and saw the forest floor nearly eighty feet below. The XR311 was positioned perpendicularly upon two parallel boughs that were each three feet thick. Pardus noticed that the branches of the baobab were strung with thick, woody liana vines that reached all the way to the roots of the tree. Pardus slung his M16 over his shoulder and climbed onto the branch that the backend of the XR311 was perched upon.

"Hurry up," Pardus said. "Before the branches give way."

"You're out of your mind, Pardus," Disciple said. "One wrong move and we're dead. We should just wait for Stalker Force to get here."

"And what," Pardus grunted. "Let them carry you?"

Thanatos and Eros were already crawling out through the roll bars of the XR311, climbing onto the thick branches. The vehicle swayed slightly from the shifting weight, and the broken branches in the cab inched higher towards Logos's legs. Andrei immediately clambered out of his seat and hoisted himself onto a branch. Logos continued to laugh, shaking his head as he followed Andrei out. "Mother Mary, full of grace..."

Disciple remained in the bed of the XR311 as it nosed-down towards the forest floor. Pardus grabbed the CIA agent by the collar of his jacket and dragged him out onto the branch beside him. The XR311 lurched forward violently and crushed the branches spearing through its undercarriage. The vehicle fell through the lower boughs of the baobab and spun in a slow arc through the air, gnarled liana vines ricocheting from its falling form.

Andrei nearly lost his grip as the baobab trembled with the release of the XR311's weight. He slipped around the branch he was on and clung to it like a desperate baboon as the XR311 struck the earth hood-first below. The vehicle exploded and a ball of fire rose from its erupting fuel reservoir. Andrei stared dimly at the fire until Logos pulled him upright on the branch beside him.

"Mother Mary had mercy," Logos clucked. "God bless."

Thanatos pointed overhead. "God's got nothin' to do with that."

There was a voluminous roar from above that shook the baobab tree in its roots. Everybody clung to their branches as the canopy roiled around them. Screaming grey parrots and colobus monkeys fled for cover from the other tree tops. Andrei looked up through the tunnel the XR311 had carved through the baobab canopy and saw the Goliath

carcharodontosaurus baring its bloodied teeth at them from the edge of the cliff. The Goliath's long black jaws creased into a grimace as Xavier's bodily fluids drained through its fangs. Andrei felt his heart seize when he saw Xavier's flayed scalp hanging between the carcharodontosaurus's serrated teeth.

"Woah, easy," Logos said, putting a hand on Andrei's shoulder. The young scientist was swaying as though he were drunk. His lower jaw hung open, his face blanched of color. The Goliath craned its head further out over the cliff's edge and bellowed, sending the dislodged scalp flying from its teeth. Andrei retched and doubled over at the waist, his head pointed towards the forest floor. Logos grabbed Andrei by the shoulder and held him back, saying, "Whoa, doc - hold on - relax!"

"Bit squeamish, Doc?" Thanatos said. "Chip up, mate."

"Xavier-" Andrei croaked. "It - it killed - killed Xavier"

"So it would seem," Pardus said. "Sorry for your loss."

"How could you tell?" Disciple asked, looking at Andrei.

"It - it - Xavier," Andrei stuttered. "His - his *scalp*- it "

Andrei groaned and leaned forward, vomiting between his dangling legs. Logos inched away from Andrei and grimaced when he heard the vomit's splattering impact. The carcharodontosaurus roared again from the cliff and the baobab branches bobbed in the open air.

Thanatos and Disciple steadied themselves upon their mossy tree limb.

Eros looked to Pardus and saw the Vietnamese squad-leader tugging on a wooden liana vine, testing its hold on the bough they were on.

"Easiest way down," Eros said. "Right, boss?"

"Right," Pardus said. He hooked the heels of his boots around the vine and started his descent. Eros and Thanatos both grabbed onto vines of their own and shimmied down to the forest floor. Disciple groaned and shook his head as he looked down to the XR311 smoldering eighty feet below. Logos raised his eyebrows at the sweating CIA agent and laughed. "Scared of heights?"

"Fucking mortified," Disciple swallowed.

"That - that Goliath," Andrei wheezed. "Its going to follow us down here now that it knows we're easy...easy prey..."

"Better get moving then, doc," Logos said. The African American mercenary swung off of the branch and started working his way down a thick rope of liana. Andrei shook his head; he couldn't fathom

continuing a mission without Xavier Wise at his side. The Captain of Stalker Force had been his closest confidant and only true friend since he had been rescued from Vietnam. Andrei was scared to think of running Stalker Force without him; it would mean that Syd Kinane, Xavier's second in command, would be in charge of the team. Andrei wished the Goliath had taken him instead.

"Get moving, Doctor Wynn," Pardus called from below. He was already crouching with Thanatos and Eros behind the wrecked XR311. "You too, Disciple! I'm not about to have any of my men risking a fall to carry your ass down."

"Fucking bastard," Disciple grumbled. He looked across to Andrei and saw that the scientist was gone; already halfway down a vine of his own. Disciple shook his head, closed his eyes, and started sliding slowly down a wooden liana vine. The CIA agent kept his eyes pinched shut for an agonizing minute until he felt his boots touch the soft earth. A wide hand slapped Disciple on the shoulder and he barked in surprise.

"Easy, knob-jockey," Thanatos said. "Don't step in the doc's honk."

"The *what*?" Disciple said, blinking. He looked down and saw he was standing in a puddle of Andrei's vomit. "Oh, Jesus..."

"Quiet," Pardus grunted. He rose to his feet behind the burning XR311 and made a circling motion with his hand. Eros, Thanatos and Logos formed up around Pardus with their own rifles raised. Pardus looked at Disciple and Andrei and gesticulated with his hand for them to go prone. Disciple took his own M16 from his shoulder and laid flat beneath a bed of pink and green ferns. Andrei stretched out on his stomach beside the CIA agent and unholstered his M1911 pistol. The group was silent. The flames rising from the crumpled hood of the XR311 crackled and spat immolated oil. The Goliath howled from the cliff above the treetops, but none of the animals of the forest gave notice to the territorial predator. Andrei began to feel a familiar fear rise within his heart; the instinctual terror of the silence that preceded a utahraptor ambush. Andrei immediately thought to check for Xavier by his side, but he quickly caught his own foolishness and shook his head. His mind was still swimming with the sight of Xavier's flayed scalp somersaulting from the Goliath's parting jaws.

Andrei went cold; he heard footsteps approaching.

Pardus motioned for Eros to go right, then for Thanatos to go left. He directed Logos to move further back, behind the baobab tree. The group swiftly separated and took cover amongst the lush forest undergrowth. Pardus crept around the XR311, aiming the barrel of his M16 around the crumpled bed. The heat radiating from the flaming XR311 burned intensely hot, but Pardus ignored it. A native Ovimbundu, dressed in threadbare cotton clothes, was standing in the

center of Pardus's iron sights.

The approaching Ovimbundu man was wielding an AK-47; Pardus assumed he was a member of a rebel militia. It was impossible to tell which militia the man fought for, as AK47's were more common than bread in any Cold War conflict. Pardus watched as six other native Ovimbundu men crept through the tree-line, wading into the waist-high ferns with their rusted AK47's held high. The Ovimbundu men moved slowly, apprehensively, as they stepped around the scattered ten-foot tall kiepersol trees.

Disciple held his breath as he watched the approaching gang of guerilla soldiers. He knew that Quad Equitum couldn't engage the rebels in a firefight without breaking the Law of Armed Conflict. The last thing the team needed at this point was getting embroiled in combat with any of the local rebel armies. He wanted to take command of the situation, but he had only ever served in the military as a member of the Psychological Operations division, also known as Psy-Ops. Disciple had never been face to face with a tangible enemy. He was suddenly painfully aware of his own tepid impotence in the face of hostile armed combatants. Disciple was helpless as he watched Pardus give the hand-sign for five targets – then a raised arm as a sign to prepare to attack.

Pardus dropped his arm, and Quad Equitum opened fire.

The guerilla soldiers didn't even have time to take cover; five of the men were instantly peppered by bullets that cleaved through their skulls, sternums and stomachs. The two surviving Ovimbundu guerillas ducked behind the narrow trunks of the kiepersol trees, barking to one another in the Umbundu language. The fire-fight ceased as quickly as it had begun. Disciple was still frozen with his shoulders hunched up to his cheeks when the last echoing rifle report faded away to the whining silence of tinnitus. The men of Quad Equitum strode forward from their covered positions, their rifles aimed at the two surviving Ovimbundu men.

Disciple and Andrei crept out from their cover as Quad Equitum circled the two Ovimbundu men. The rebels dropped their AK47's and Eros kicked the derelict rifles away. Thanatos thrust the stock of his shotgun into the face of one of the Ovimbundu, caving the man's cheekbone inward. The Ovimbundu man fell howling to his knees as Eros broke the rebel's ribs beneath his boot.

The other captured Ovimbundu man rose to his feet to halt Eros's assault. Thanatos turned and thrust the stock of his shotgun into the standing Ovimbunduman's gut, folding him over at the waist. Thanatos put a hand on the Ovimbundu man's shoulder and threw him back into the undergrowth beside his companion.

"*Cyka blyat*," Andrei muttered. "Do something, Disciple!"

Disciple simply watched, shaking his head in disbelief.

Eros and Thanatos forced both of the Ovimbundu rebels to their knees in front of Pardus. Logos stood behind them, his rifle drifting from one unshaven scalp to the other. Pardus unsheathed his ka-bar and placed it to the throat of the Ovimbundu man with the concave cheekbone. The rebel panted through his teeth, whimpering as the blade drew a shallow red line across his sweating throat.

“*Camarada*,” Pardus grunted. “Speak.”

“If he’s UNITA,” Disciple whispered to Andrei, “He’ll say it back.”

“What does it matter if he’s UNITA?” Andrei asked. “He’s fucked”

“*I-irmão*,” the Ovimbundu man croaked. “*Irmão*—”

Pardus thrust his ka-bar across the Ovimbundu man’s throat, slashing the rebel’s neck wide open. The rebel fell backward as his throat spread apart like the fuchsia petals of a bougainvillea flower. The other Ovimbundu man cried out in horror and recoiled from his friend’s flailing corpse. Eros stepped forward and kicked the lone Ovimbundu man in the base of his neck, sending him face-first into a puddle of his friend’s blood. Disciple groaned audibly beside Andrei. Neither could avert their eyes from the squirming rebel with the ragged throat.

Logos grabbed the surviving Ovimbundu rebel by his dreadlocks and pulled him up into a sitting position. Pardus crouched in front of the rebel and aimed the glistening red ka-bar between the man’s eyes. The rebel anxiously squirmed where he knelt on the ground, but didn’t make any attempt to stand. Eros and Thanatos stood on either side of the Ovimbundu man, prodding his temples with their rifle barrels. Pardus stared into the Ovimbundu man’s eyes and grunted, “*Falar inglês? Speak English?*”

“*Si-Sim*,” the Ovimbundu man gasped. “Yes, yes!”

“Are you FNLA?” Pardus asked. “MPLA? UPA?”

“Em-MPLA,” the Ovimbundu man panted. “Please, *misericórdia*—”

“English,” Pardus hissed, placing his ka-bar against the MPLA rebel’s throat. “Speak english, commie, so the good CIA agent can understand you. How many more of you are there, here? Where are your people hiding? *Diga-me ou eu vou esfolá-lo vivo*. Tell me now, you little baboon! Where are your people hiding?!”

“We-we camp in old village,” the rebel panted. He tried to lean back from Pardus’s ka-bar, but he was kept in place by the business ends of Quad Equitum’s rifle barrels. “Village is past Panopolis mine, on Akhmim River— beside stream from river. Please, please – is all I know! We called by Cubans, *El Leóns*— is all I know, *misericórdia*, *irmão*”

Pardus raked his ka-bar through the begging Ovimbundu man’s throat, releasing a gully of blood that splashed down the rebel’s chest.

Pardus stepped aside and Quad Equitum fired their rifles, peppering the rebel's torso with bullets that left indentations large enough to fit a fist into. Disciple and Andrei remained where they were laying beneath the baobab tree. The burning XR311 illuminated Pardus's sharp features as he walked past, towards Disciple and Andrei. "You hear that, Disciple?" Pardus said. "We have the Communist rebels - the MPLA - and the Cuban *Leóns* looking for the Portuguese collider. I would advise that we keep any more rebels from intercepting our operation. It would be in our best interests, collectively, to find that village and exterminate all these brutes while we have the chance." Disciple didn't speak for a moment; he simply stared past Pardus at the mutilated Ovimbundu carcasses. He looked from the gunshot-riddled corpses to Pardus's glistening red ka-bar. The talisman chained to the dagger dripped blood down the hilt of the blade. Disciple's tan face was suddenly as pale as the trunks of the kiepersol trees. He shook his head woefully as Pardus and the other mercenaries of Quad Equitum circled him.

"No," Disciple said, sitting upright. "No, Nguyen"

"Pardus," Erossaid coldly. "His call-sign is '*Pardus*'."

Thanatos and Logos nodded in silent agreement. Disciple looked at Andrei, but the scientist was sitting on his haunches, holding his head in his hands. The glasses hanging from the end of Andrei's nose were badly cracked and spider-webbed. Disciple rubbed his eyes and sat back down beside him. Pardus scowled and stooped down so his face was inches away from Disciple's.

"Get up," Pardus said. "We have to find Stalker Force."

"You're a fucking animal," Andrei grunted. "You're a murderer."

"You know who I am," Pardus growled. "Now get up." CHAPTER TEN—TERTIUM QUID

The rocky buttress at the end of the plateau was a sheer-drop to the miombo woodlands below. Zosimus Kaikara and Josef Gustavo led the survivors of Stalker Force down the granite wall, weaving through the vegetation that clung to the crumbling cliff face. The rookie, Willard Bennington, had been disconsolate over the loss of Xavier Wise. The medic, Lalo Flores, had to forcibly pull him halfway down the cliff-face. After an hour of climbing with the Goliath carcharodontosaurus roaring overhead, Willard had turned stoic and silent. The only men that had talked during the climb were James Molnar and Syd Kinane. "Never seen nothin' so big," Syd said when he reached the bottom of the buttress. He tugged his M60 out of a coil of thorn brush and pulled a stem from the trigger guard. "Swear as I've seen it, even the Father T. rex back in 'Nam ain't as big as that big burly Goliath up on that cliff. Listen— you can still hear him roarin' and carryin' on, puttin' on a show."

Molnar let go of the granite wall and dropped down to his feet beside Syd. Willard's hanging boots kicked over their heads. Syd grabbed the rookie by his belt and dropped him on the ground next to Molnar. Through a break in the canopy they were able to see the Goliath carcharodontosaurus pacing along the edge of the cliff, lumbering towards the ridge road that led down into the forest.

"Looks like the Goliath's on the move," Molnar said. "If only we had a David to knock him down. He's probably looking for Quad Equitum's XR311; a big theropod like that won't let an easy meal get away. Or maybe the Goliath has an issue with us trespassing in his territory, and he's trying to finish the job."

"Then we should find the others before the Goliath gets the chance," Zosimus said. The Ovimbundu bounty hunter was crouched beside Josef, surveying the surrounding forest over the barrel of his G3 rifle. They were in a clearing within the miombo forest, positioned against an alcove in the face of the buttress. The clearing was heavily shaded by towering baobab trees and their resplendent canopies. The shafts of light that fell through the upper-story canopy were sieved through the crimson leaves of the lower miombo and muchesa trees, saturating the forest in dim scarlet light.

"*Nossa Senhora de Fátima*," Josef exhaled. He took off his broken gold-framed sunglasses and threw them aside, rubbing his tired eyes. "It's like a photographer's dark room in here. We better hope there's no small dinosaurs lurking around, like those 'raptors' the Americans keep going on about. There'd be no seeing them. Let's get out of the shade; more daylight the closer we get to the savanna, *sim*?"

"*Sim*," Zosimus said. He was studying the kiepersol trees that dotted the undergrowth, like wooden mushrooms capped with leafy green fronds. Some of the ten-foot kiepersol trees appeared to have had their tops bitten off. There were several psittacosaurus and hypsilophodon foraging among the bases of the surrounding muchesa and miombo trees, but none came near the kiepersols. Zosimus shook his head wearily and muttered, "This isn't the motherland I remembered, *irmão*."

"Doesn't matter who-knows-what about your motherland anymore," Syd said. "This ain't your Angola anymore. This is the dinosaurs' Angola now, y'understand? It don't take the dinosaurs long to start adaptin' to the environments they end up in. Soon y'all will notice that there ain't no lions, no leopards."

"Quiet, Kinane," Zosimus said over his shoulder. "I'm thinking."

"Kinane?" Syd repeated, thumping his broad chest with a fist. "Don't go oversteppin' your boundaries, *boy*. Only man that'll ever call me 'Kinane' just got ate by that fuckin' Goliath up on the plateau. S'far as I'm concerned, I just became the CO of this outfit you're 'sposed to be

guiding. Understand me?"

Zosimus lowered the G3 rifle, grinding his teeth.

"Easy, *irmão*," Josef said, putting a hand on Zosimus's shoulder.

"*Senhor* Kinane— *amigo* we understand that you're in charge of Stalker Force right now. No contest there"

"Ha!" Molnar chuffed. "I'll contest it. Flores will, too."

"Leave me out of it, *hermano*," Lalo said. He was kneeling beside Willard, patting the younger man on the back. Willard hid his teary eyes from the others when they looked. The rookie had yet to encounter a death in his own family; he had no way of comprehending what he would feel with the loss of his captain. The sudden death had left Willard feeling lost, empty, and silently angry with a god he had never believed in. What kind of higher power would allow a man as good and pure as Captain Wise to die so brutally, so quickly, and without any reason?

"I contest it, Kinane," Molnar said. The stocky CQB specialist walked up to Syd and put an arm around the taller man's wide shoulders.

"Kinane, the moment we let you take charge is the moment Stalker Force goes from dinosaur-hunting to ritualistic slaughter. How about you let go of that big ol' *ego* of yours for a minute and let the Angolans lead the way? They know the lay of thisland better than any of us."

"This ain't theirland," Syd spat. "Not no more."

"You're right," Zosimus said, rising to his feet. "This isn't my motherland anymore, nor *meu irmão*'s. Angola doesn't belong to the Portuguese anymore; this countrydoesn't belong to anybody but the people that want to fight and die for it. I don't intend to die for it, and I don't intend to die for you or anybody here but *meu irmão*. If you don't want to lose your life to your pride, you should biteyour tongue."

"Captain Wise..." Willard moaned. "...he had"

"Captain Wise is *gone*, Benny," Syd said. He brushed off Molnar's arm and turned to look at the rookie, still sitting beside Lalo with their backs to the cliff face. "Get off your ass and get with the program, rookie! We ain't playing a game for your Uncle Jericho! Our fucking Captain died, and whinin' ain't going to bring'm back!"

"Lay off him, Syd," Lalo said. "*Hermano*'s still green."

"Bullshit, green," Syd spat. "He ain't greener'n triceratops shit."

"*Guys*," Willard snapped, jumping to his feet. "Where the hell is the walkie-talkie that Captain Wise had? We need to get a hold of Doctor Wynn, or that CIA agent Disciple, or Pardus, or *somebody* for Christ's sake! And get off my back, Syd, you dumbasshole!"

"Easy, killer," Molnar grinned. "You've got the right attitude."

"I already tried to reach Pardus," Zosimus said. He raised the AN/PRC-6 walkie-talkie he had taken from the XR311. The walkie-talkie,

also called a 'Prick Six', was covered in Xavier's dried, flaking blood. Zosimus said, "No response yet."

"Gimme that, bounty hunter," Syd said. He jerked the walkie-talkie out of Zosimus's grip and raised the blood-stained device to his cheek. "You probably don't even know how to work the thing. Pardus; Disciple; this is Sierra Kilo. X-Ray Whiskey of Sierra Foxtrot is KIA. Repeat; X-Ray Whiskey of Sierra Foxtrot is KIA. Where are y'all? Over."

"We hear you," Pardus whispered over the walkie-talkie.

"Where are y'all?" Syd said. "Is this Pardus?"

"I hear you," the walkie talkie hissed. "We're Oscar Mike. Over."

"That mean's they're on the move," Syd said, sneering at Zosimus. He tucked the sticky walkie-talkie into his rucksack and took his M60 from its shoulder sling. "You hear that, African? All y'had to do was talk in the ol' NATO phonetic."

Zosimus clenched the pistol grip and barrel of his G3 rifle. Josef squeezed his shoulder and winked, but Zosimus ignored him. He could deal with dinosaurs in Angola; the compromise of working with the former Portuguese military; but the boisterous Americans were wearing Zosimus down in ways he couldn't even articulate. He felt he understood why so many countries allied with the United States despised Americans.

"Best we just sit tight and hold a perimeter," Syd said, looming over Zosimus's shoulder. "Right, everybody? That's what Captain Wise'd have us do. Take a minute, drink some water from yer canteens, and rest a sec'. Right, Molnar? Flores? Benny? That sound good to you, bounty hunters?"

"Sit down, Kinane," Molnar said. "Follow your own advice."

Syd narrowed his eyes at Molnar, but didn't speak. He knew better than to get on the bad side of a Jiu Jitsu black-belt. Syd heaved his M60 up to his shoulder and knelt down beside Lalo and Willard. The men kept their rifles pressed to their cheeks and watched the surrounding forest for movement. Willard choked back tears a few times in the following few minutes, but nobody broke the silence further than that.

Zosimus longed to go home; if only he had one to return to.

The panicked cries of fleeing psittacosaurus and hypsilophodon alerted Stalker Force to the arrival of Quad Equitum. Pardus was the first to break into the clearing, ducking around the kiepersol and miombo trees with Disciple at his side. Willard fired his rifle; a hair-trigger reaction. Pardus quickly dove beneath the palms and ferns that blanketed the forest floor. Disciple flinched as the round struck a miombo trunk over his shoulder. He raised his M16 above his head and

shouted, “Friendly! Hold your fire!”

“*Sorry, sir!*” Willard yelled. Syd slapped the rookie on the back of his helmet as the rest of Quad Equitum followed Pardus and Disciple into the clearing. Andrei Wynn was the last one out, stumbling behind Logos, Eros, and Thanatos. When Willard saw Andrei, he immediately sprang to his feet and came running over. He nearly knocked over Disciple as he went to embrace the bruised and beaten scientist.

“Easy, Benny,” Andrei said, patting the rookie on his back. Willard let go of Andrei and quickly wiped away whatever tears had fallen down his narrow cheeks. Andrei squeezed his shoulder and said, “Don’t worry, comrade...I’m sorry about Captain Wise. He’s better off now; he’s gone from this hellish place.”

“He won’t die in vain,” Willard exhaled. “I know he won’t.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Andrei said. “But I’ve been wrong before.” “Please,” Pardus called over his shoulder. “If the mourning is over, we have matters to discuss. Namely, how we’re going to get to the Collider now that our only means of transportation are gone. That, and the communist rebels in our midst.”

“The MPLA is here?” Zosimus said. “How do you know?”

“We bagged seven of the cunts,” Thanatos said. “Easy doddle.” “You okay, doc?” Willard said, squinting at Andrei’s suddenly ashen face. Andrei shook his head vigorously when he caught Pardus staring at him. Pardus’s fingers were playing with the talisman strung from his sheathed ka-bar. The disc shimmered red in the sunlight seeping through the muchesa canopy. Pardus winked at Andrei and flicked the talisman, causing it to spin and blur like a hypnotist’s pocket-watch. “*Dah*,” Andrei said. “Just shaken, is all.”

“So what’s the plan?” Syd said. “Keep moving?”

“Affirmative,” Disciple said. “If we move at a quick enough pace, we can get to the end of this forest by nightfall. There’s an abandoned Portuguese shipping outpost, El Dorado Expeditionary Freight, in the jungles at the foothills of Mount Chrysopoeia. If we can get there, we can see if there are any modes of transportation available. Boats, jeeps, et cetera. If not, we’ll be walking.”

“Walking?” Molnar said. “Why not call an evac - ahelicopter?”

“We lost the radios on the XR311’s,” Disciple said. “And we couldn’t risk giving away the position of the collider, regardless. Pardus is right; we’ve got communist MPLA rebels in the area, as well as the Cuban *Leóns*. If we’re going to get to that collider without alerting these communists to where it is, we have to keep to the shadows – soto speak.”

“So be it,” Josef said. “We’ve lost both of the XR311’s to this...Goliath, as well as the commanding officer of Stalker Force. If you would rather we walk on foot to Mount Chrysopoeia, then so it shall be. I expect this risk will be reflected in *meu irmão*’s pay as well as my own. As for these utahraptors and their disease, DM10...”

“Consider your pay doubled,” Pardus said. Disciple glared at Pardus, but the Vietnamese mercenary ignored him. “I’ll speak with Jericho; he’s the one picking up the tab for Quad Equitum’s involvement in this mission, as well as your own. I apologize on behalf of Disciple for not informing you two sooner. If I had known you two weren’t informed...”

“In regards to the passing of Captain Wise,” Disciple said, clearing his throat. “Corporal Kinane is going to be overseeing Stalker Force for the time being. I’m sure General Jericho will amend the situation in the future, once we’re all back state-side. Now, if we could please get moving, we have a lot of ground to cover. We’ll be lucky to get out of this forest by nightfall, barring any further complications.”

Syd slapped Molnar on the shoulder. “Y’hear that? I’m in charge of y’all now, Molnar. Better get that mouth of yours in check before I have to instill some discipline.”

“I’m in charge,” Disciple said, staring at Syd. “Remember that.”

“So you say,” Pardus grinned. “Take point, *sir*.”

“Right,” Disciple said. “Standard diamond formation, everybody; safeties off. If we encounter any rebels, we hold our fire unless absolutely necessary. If we encounter UNITA guerillas, or FNLA, we may be able to consider them friendly. If we’re lucky, we could even work out some sort of deal for transportation”

“Should be easy,” Molnar said. “What with all the money your dad, our dear ol’ Uncle Sam, doles out to the FNLA and UNITA. Hell, while you’re at it, you could pay them to destroy the collider themselves.” Thanatos laughed. “Not bloody likely, mate.”

“Quiet, Molnar,” Disciple snapped. “Again, everybody; if we encounter rebels, only open fire if they shoot first. This might be an active warzone, but we’re not a part of this war. We’re just taking a walk in a park, as far as the locals may know. We were already lucky to get away from the MPLA once. We may not be so lucky next time.”

“So you say,” Erossaid. “They were lucky it ended fast.”

“He’s right,” Logos said. “We coulda dragged it out.”

Disciple’s face reddened, but it was impossible for the others to tell because of the crimson light streaming through the miombo canopy overhead. Disciple waved his hand forward and started walking, with Zosimus and Josef reluctantly following a half-step behind him. The rest of the men arranged themselves spatially into a diamond formation with Andrei holding his M1911 pistol in the center of the

group. The Goliath carcharodontosaurus was no longer making any noise from the plateau above; the sounds of Angola's arboreal wildlife returned with the momentary peace.

Zosimus didn't trust any peace existing within his motherland.

CHAPTER ELEVEN— EGO DIFFERENTIATION

The sun shifted westward over the miombo woodlands as the day transitioned into a sweltering afternoon. The men of Stalker Force and Quad Equitum had only taken one break to rest during their arduous journey towards the savanna. Zosimus Kaikara and Josef Gustavo walked a few paces behind Disciple as he led the group around the colossal trunks of baobab and mutondo trees. The canopy was in constant motion as colobus and talapoin monkeys crossed the overarching network of sunlit boughs. A family of kinda baboons paused to chatter and squeal as Zosimus passed beneath the blazing red miombo treetops.

Zosimus raised his head to watch as a palm-nut vulture fluttered down to roost amongst the white-petalled flowers blooming from the outstretched branch of a muchesa tree. The closer the men got to the savanna, the less baobab and mutondo trees stifled the sunlight pouring through the canopy. The confining darkness was quickly lifted as the multitiered canopy grew to resemble a blindingly bright stain-glass collage of jade, ruby and amber.

"*Mãe é linda*," Josef said, grinning at Zosimus. "Remember?"

Zosimus returned his eyes to the forest floor as they walked. "No, *irmão*. *Mãe natureza* isn't beautiful. Mother Nature lost her beauty over the past decade. All the beauty you can see in *mãe natureza* is cosmetic; the blood of her children spoils her roots."

"That American, Molnar; he mentioned ego," Josef said. "Do you recall that? He was telling the other American, Syd, to keep his ego in check. Do you know what he meant?"

"Pride, *irmão*," Zosimus said. He took a hand off of his G3 rifle's barrel and scratched a phantom itch beneath his shirt. "Do you have any *cocaína*? The dead man - Captain Wise - he took everything I had and threw it outon the way here."

"*Nada, meu irmão*," Josef said. "Forget the drugs."

"*Bebida*?" Zosimus said, licking his lips. "*Licor*?"

"*Nada, irmão*; nobooze," Josef said. He lowered his voice so that Disciple and Pardus wouldn't hear. The CIA agent was a few feet ahead of them, gingerly toeing around the half-buried roots of a muchesa tree. Josef brushed through a waist-high misty plume bush, relishing the ginger scents of the pale flowers as they drifted past his face.

"Remember, *irmão*; this is our motherland. *Mãe natureza* demands your attention and respect. The *Onjoi* would have told you as such."

"I'm not *Onjoian* anymore," Zosimus grunted. He trudged through the

misty plume bush with his G3 above his head to keep the sticky leaves from clinging to therifle. "We're not Angolans anymore; we're just Africans. No more nationalities, *irmão*. Soon we will be Europeans. We could even become Americans or Asians for what its worth. We will only ever be people existing within the borders of countries. I am not *Onjoi*; we are not Angolan; we are just people, *irmão*."

"Ego," Josef said. He paused to let a psittacosaurus scamper past his feet, through the brush and into the jungle beyond. The other men briefly paused to follow the small herbivorous dinosaur's path with their rifle barrels; once it was gone, they continued walking. Josef continued, "*Irmão*, I read something once, about ego. It was by a Swiss psychologist. Somebody named Carl Gustav, or something or other. A wise man, though I am not sure if he is still alive. I think you would like his writing." "Words are worthless," Zosimus said. "Only blood will set us free."

"Listen to me, *irmão*," Josef said. "Just listen. This man - Carl Gustav - he suggested that your thoughts, what he calls the stream-of-consciousness; the internal monologue; *that* is the *Ego*. To Americans, *ego* may mean pride or vanity. But to this Swiss psychologist, *Ego* was everything of the conscious mind. All of your thoughts; your present mind; that is *Ego*. He spoke of layers beneath the ego - the subconscious beneath our perception - but their names elude me. Too many complexes and archetypes of the subconscious..." Zosimus chuffed. "What is your point, *irmão*?"

"I'm afraid you've settled too comfortably into your *persona*," Josef said. "That is the most shallow aspect of the mind, the part of the conscious mind that the *Ego* has the most determination over. The *Persona* is the character you choose to play in life; the mask you show the world. You know, things like soldier; bounty hunter; Angolan; *Onjoi*; they are merely facets of your *persona*. Just as you say - who is to stop you from being European, or Asian? Your *Ego* determines your *Persona*; you choose to be *Onjoi*, or you choose to be European, simply by making it so."

"You're losing me, *irmão*," Zosimus grunted.

Josef grinned. "If you had your *cocaína* you would understand."

"*Sim*," Zosimus sighed. "If only. Keep talking, *irmão*."

Josef said, "All of this talk about what Angola means to you, or me, as a motherland or a bastardizing parent; it is nonsense. *Nada*, you understand? You need to understand your *Ego*, *irmão*. You must look behind your own mask; your *Persona*; this character you've chosen to play in life. We are more than bounty hunters; we are what we believe - and make - ourselves to be. We are our own *Ego*'s. But your *Ego* has been broken, or else you wouldn't be asking me for *bebida* and *cocaína* while walking through a warzone with dinosaurs."

"I think we all need some *bebida*," Zosimus said. "A good drink."
"No, *meu irmão*," Josef said. "You need to strengthen your *Ego*."
"My mind is strong," Zosimus bristled. "My *ego* isn't weak."
"Your nightmares may disagree," Josef said. "Think about it."
Zosimus shook his head; he could still feel the talons of his nightmares sinking through his subconscious, but he had no way of verbalizing how or why. Josef studied Zosimus's stoic face for a few seconds before shrugging it off; he had known Zosimus long enough to accept his partner's peculiarities. The pair of bounty hunters fell silent as they followed Disciple through the scattered shadows of the sunwashed forest.

Zosimus didn't want to think of his last nightmare, of leopards splitting open the bellies of pregnant *Onjoi* women, eating their unborn young. The bounty hunter wasn't sure of what answers he could find in his dreams and nightmares. So long as he could escape the shadow of Angola, he believed he could find happiness. Zosimus knew he could find peace and momentary escape through the drugs and women that Quad Equitum's wealth would provide.

Zosimus felt sure that wealth was the missing piece to his *ego*; it seemed to be why Pardus and Quad Equitum were so content with their work. Even the Americans of Stalker Force, being paid by the most wealthy military in the world, had found their own peace and acceptance with the deathly dangers of their jobs. Zosimus knew that the key to his peace and happiness was resting in Pardus's hands. He recalled Pardus mentioning other work, without Quad Equitum; truly good work, for a higher calling. Zosimus would remember to ask Pardus what he had meant by that.

Zosimus wanted to do more than survive; he wanted to thrive.

Disciple halted abruptly and raised his fist in the air. Zosimus and Josef stumbled to a stop beside the CIA agent. Quad Equitum and Stalker Force paused with their rifles held ready. The forest appeared no different from anything else they had seen in the past few hours of hiking. The air felt like hot tar, smoldering and suffocatingly thick. Zosimus and Josef both turned to watch Disciple's face. The CIA agent seemed to be in intense concentration, his puffy eyes narrowed.

A tremendous bellowing rose from deeper within the forest, coming from the direction of the savanna further south. Stalker Force and Quad Equitum suddenly became alive with movement, surveying the surrounding panorama of trees and multicolored brush through the scopes and iron sights of their rifles.

Zosimus felt the ground trembling beneath his boots and immediately thought of the elephants he had tracked with his father as a child in

the *Onjoi* tribe. The vibrations in the earth became more powerful with each passing second. If the footsteps were from elephants, it was an entire herd. Zosimus raised his eyes to the treetops and saw the variegated canopy rolling in red, green and yellow-leaf waves.

“Everybody, get to cover,” Disciple said. “Now!”

Stalker Force and Quad Equitum started maneuvering through the undergrowth, ducking to hide behind tree trunks and fern-smothered logs. The footsteps seemed to be coming in layered patterns, indicating that more than one creature was on the move. Zosimus thought of the possibility of more *carnotaurus*, the creatures that had chased their XR311’s. He hoped that all of the demonic-looking beasts had been killed by the Goliath that had eaten Captain Wise.

The approaching footsteps moved the entire jungle. The baobab tree that Zosimus and Josef were hiding behind was shaking all the way from its half-buried roots to its wide-spread branches eighty feet overhead. Zosimus peered around the edge of the baobab trunk and saw a herd of gargantuan, teal-skinned dinosaurs slowly trudging through the undergrowth, crushing shrubs and kiepersol trees underfoot. Zosimus looked to where Andrei and Willard were kneeling behind a muchesa log and hissed, “Doctor, *amigo*! What are these things? Predators?”

Andrei peeked over the fern-draped log and shook his head, *no*. Willard rose to his knees beside Andrei to watch the approaching herd of dinosaurs. The animals seemed impassive; the baboons in the understory canopy gave little regard for the prehistoric creatures. Willard let go of a shaky breath as a smile slowly formed on his thin face.

“Looks just like a triceratops,” Willard whispered.

“*Centrosaurus*?”

“*Pachyrhinosaurus*, comrade,” Andrei said. “Herbivorous ceratopsids closely related to triceratops and centrosaurus. We’ve never seen them in the wild before, but you could recognize those faces from a mile away. Don’t be afraid, bounty hunters; take a look. They’re really quite beautiful.”

Zosimus crept out from behind the wide trunk of the baobab and watched as the mass of herbivores moved in a slow current around the muchesa and miombo trees. The *pachyrhinosaurus* had bodies similar to triceratops, with leathery turquoise skin and quills adorning their mottled black backs. Each animal had a bony frill on the backs of their heads, covered in black and gold skin, with inward-facing horns

ringing the outer edges. Large, blunted horns the size of pumpkins protruded from the ends of their beaked snouts.

The sunlight that bore through the canopy cast brilliant splashes of gold across the pachyrhinosaurus' dusty flanks as they passed through the undergrowth. A sunlit cloud of rust-red dirt and shredded leaf litter blossomed from beneath the bodies of the animals as they grazed on palms and fern fronds. Some of the larger adult pachyrhinosaurus chewed the leafy heads off of the short kiepersol trees. Zosimus didn't trust the animals, but he didn't feel afraid of them, either. He felt the same awe he had experienced as a child while following the elephant herds with his father.

"Beautiful," Willard whispered, smiling wide. He was watching the dinosaurs through a pair of binoculars, though it wasn't necessary. Even from a hundred feet away, each pachyrhinosaurus appeared large enough to dwarf the XR311's that Quad Equitum and Stalker Force had ridden in. The rookie's excitement was contagious; Josef and Andrei began smiling as well. Willard said, "Captain Wise would've loved to see these lizards."

Molnar, Syd, and Lalo crept their way over to Willard and Andrei. Disciple and Quad Equitum remained where they were, crouched behind the dried husk of a fallen miombo tree. Zosimus would have preferred to join them, but he remained by Josef's side with Stalker Force. The pachyrhinosaurus herd was ambling closer, now only fifty feet away. It seemed to Zosimus that the men of Stalker Force were enamored with the animals, rather than wary of them.

"I can't imagine these animals are too hostile, but just as standard precaution, we should keep our distance from their young," Andrei said. "If there's an alpha male, a bull, we'll need to identify it right away. We don't want to make a bull pachyrhinosaurus angry. If these animals are anything like the triceratops back in Vietnam, they may be omnivorous."

"I think I see the bull, sir," Willard said, pointing. "Teno'clock." Andrei followed the direction of Willard's finger and saw the largest of the pachyrhinosaurus on the left flank of the foraging herd. The bull was much more robust and muscular than the other pachyrhinosaurus, with a flare of gold splashed across his heavily scarred crest. Despite his massive bulk, the bull pachyrhinosaurus moved swiftly around the fringes of the herd. Zosimus watched the bull warily as it trotted alongside its harem of females and their infants.

The bull circled the herd and cut a path between the rest of the pachyrhinosaurus and the men of Stalker Force. Zosimus watched as fragments of sunlight scattered across the body of the animal, revealing deep, grooved scars in its coriaceous skin. Zosimus's heartbeat jumped when the bull pachyrhinosaurus paused to bark at

the stragglers in the back of the herd. He could feel the animal's booming vocalizations throughout his core. "Look at *meu irmão* there, the bull," Josef whispered to Zosimus. "He must have taken ten rounds with some of those dinosaurs up on the plateau. The king doesn't give a shit about any Goliaths coming to take *his* home away; he'll defend *his* family and *mãe natureza* to the last breath."

Zosimus narrowed his eyes at Josef.

Josef flashed a pearly-white smile. "Did I strike a nerve, *irmão*?"

Syd Kinane came over and stood behind them. The long barrel of his M60 hung uncomfortably close to the corner of Zosimus's eye. Zosimus brushed the rifle aside with the back of his hand as Syd said, "So what do you say, Doctor Wynn? Can we just keep our distance and continue on our way?"

"I would say we can continue," Andrei said. The nearest members of the pachyrhinosaurus herd were now only twenty feet away from the men. A few of the youngest pachyrhinosaurus, pig-sized infants, toddled towards the half-hidden men with an air of juvenile curiosity and the clumsiness to match. One infant with the big black eyes of a doe waddled over to where Zosimus and Josef were crouched. The baby

pachyrhinosaurus was carrying a bouquet of white muchesa flowers in its beaked jaws.

"Shit," Zosimus said, backing away. He waved his hands defensively, trying to shoo off the curious animal. "Go away, little one. Go, *shoo*."

"Relax, *irmão*; it's only a baby," Josef said, wiggling his fingers at the infant dinosaur. The baby pachyrhinosaurus shuffled past as Josef ran his hand along the animal's mottled hide. He opened his mouth, smiling, amazed by the warmth that seemed to emanate from the pachyrhinosaurus's leathery hide. Josef laughed and said, "It's so warm! How is it so warm? I thought they were cold-blooded, like lizards..?"

"Based on our research, we've come to understand that most of the dinosaurs were actually warmblooded," Andrei said. "Ceratopsians like pachyrhinosaurus were a part of the family *Ornithischia*, from the same family tree as *Theropoda*, which eventually led to warm-blooded birds. That's why these animals are so agile and always on the move; they don't rely on the sun the way reptiles and amphibians do. It's also why they're prone to migrate. The cold doesn't keep them contained."

"*Magnifico*," Josef whispered. He drummed his fingers on the infant pachyrhinosaurus's dazzling gold crest, feeling the ivory beneath its dappled skin. "I imagine some of the ivory on the adults could pull a lot of money on the black market. Have you ever..."

"Don't get any ideas," Willard said, narrowing his eyes at Josef.

"We're here to monitor the animals and prevent their spread, not

poach them for trophies. Unless you think you're a member of Stalker Force, that is."

"I'm guilty," Syd grunted. "I got a mounted quetzalcoatlus head." Josef said, "Easy, kid— Benny, I mean - I was just spit-balling early retirement plans. Have you ever dealt with dinosaur poachers before, back in Vietnam?"

"*Dah*, of course," Andrei said. "A lot of poachers have tried to gather utahraptor pelts, because the Chinese believed the dinosaurs were dragons or demons and started to think that utahraptor pelts grant invisibility or some ridiculous shit like that. Most inexperienced dinosaur hunters end up being hunted by the dinosaurs, though." "Ironical," Josef said. He let his hand rest on the humped back of the infant pachyrhinosaurus as the animal tugged at the ferns between the roots of a miombo tree. "So, are you sure this is okay? Shouldn't we be worried about some mama dinosaurs, or the bull?"

Andrei glanced from the infant to the rest of the herd dispersing around them. Some of the pachyrhinosaurus were walking past Quad Equitum, foraging beyond Stalker Force's line of sight. Zosimus, Josef, and the men of Stalker Force were collected in a ring within the herd. Andrei said, "It seems like the animals don't mind our presence, but they're surrounding us, which isn't good."

"Then we need to get away," Zosimus said, lifting his G3 rifle. "I'll go get Disciple and Quad Equitum so we can leave. We shouldn't be here, loitering amongst these animals. We don't know what they're capable of."

"*Dah*," Andrei said. "Sorry to get us bogged down 'smelling the roses', as the Americans say. I couldn't help it. Go get Pardus, bounty hunter."

Zosimus cautiously walked around the grazing pachyrhinosaurus to the moss-draped miombo log that Quad Equitum had sought shelter behind. There were a few pachyrhinosaurus further ahead, their snouts shifting through the mosaic carpet of floral vegetation. Whatever warmth or awe that the men of Stalker Force had felt for the herbivorous dinosaurs didn't exist with Quad Equitum. Disciple and the paramilitary mercenaries were studying the animals through the crosshairs of their rifles, as though the dinosaurs were merely paper targets on a firing range.

"Come on," Zosimus said. "No more bird-watching. Time to" Logos yanked Zosimus down behind the log and hissed, "*Ssshhh...*" Zosimus blinked and said, "*Que-*"

Logos clamped a hand over Zosimus's mouth and pointed at the shadows of the forest beyond the pachyrhinosaurus. The jungle seemed serene and still, the only sound being the soft grunts of the herbivores. Zosimus listened to the clatter of the pachyrhinosaurus'

beaks as they uprooted crackling-dry grass and white trumpet-petal hibiscus. The sunlight that poured through the canopy penetrated the dusty air of the forest like glittering pillars of pyrite. The only thing Zosimus could hear were the pachyrhinosaurus and other dinosaurs grumbling from the savanna to the south.

"I don't see anything," Zosimus whispered.

Logos handed his binoculars to Zosimus and motioned for him to look over the log. Several dozen meters past the furthest pachyrhinosaurus, Zosimus could make out the silhouetted figure of the Goliath carcharodontosaurus crouched in the undergrowth, half-submerged in foliage. The Goliath's jaws, as long as a pair of canoes, opened and closed as it took shallow breaths. The fiery eyes of the carnivore were locked onto a nearby pachyrhinosaurus calf.

Zosimus passed the binoculars back to Logos and stood up. "We have to get away before the Goliath attacks that infant; we can't stay any longer."

"Agreed," Disciple said, rising to his feet beside Zosimus. The rest of Quad Equitum gathered their gear and followed Zosimus and Disciple back to Stalker Force. Once they were gathered together, they arranged into their diamond-shape formation with Zosimus and Josef on point with Disciple.

"Come on, time to hustle," Disciple said.

Zosimus looked to the left and saw the bull pachyrhinosaurus circling the herd, blocking the men from the direction of the savanna. When Zosimus looked to the right, he saw the body of another pachyrhinosaurus blocking their way out of the herd. The herbivores were beginning to show signs of agitation, groaning and barking as they waved their quilled tails in the air.

"Something's wrong," Willard said. "What's going on?"

"The car...the carchar...the *Goliath* is back," Zosimus grunted.

The bull pachyrhinosaurus bellowed powerfully, filling the open air with a trumpeting tone that sent the infant pachyrhinosaurus scampering back to their mothers. The sudden roar in response from the

carcharodontosaurus across the forest burrowed through the meat between Zosimus's ears. He fell to his knees, gritting his teeth in pain. The pachyrhinosaurus herd circled Stalker Force and Quad Equitum as the infants darted around their legs.

"What are they doing?" Disciple shouted. "They're trapping us!"

"They're forming a defensive perimeter, like buffalo," Andrei said.

"They're protecting their young from the carcharodontosaurus; they must not have noticed us. Be thankful they're protecting us as well, comrade."

"We need to get the hell away from here," Zosimus said, spinning on

his heel. No matter where he looked, he only saw the swinging tails and thick legs of the other pachyrhinosaurus closing in around them. Zosimus got on his hands and knees and looked between the stamping feet of the adult pachyrhinosaurus, shouldering aside the infants as they scampered and squealed around him.

Zosimus peered between the legs of a pachyrhinosaurus and saw the wide, taloned feet of the carcharodontosaurus circling the herd. The Goliath lowered its head to the ground, and Zosimus saw its burning eyes rotate in his direction. The Goliath's ribcage, a collage of charcoal-black skin and volcanic stripes, contracted and heaved as the predator sniffed the forest floor. The pachyrhinosaurus herd were barking and howling in a constant, thunderous chorus. The bull pachyrhinosaurus stood between his herd and the Goliath, kicking up clods of dirt with his back feet while huffing through his nostrils.

"Doctor Wynn," Willard cried out. "They're going to fight!"

"Everybody, on your feet," Disciple shouted. "Get ready to run!"

Zosimus stared through the legs of the pachyrhinosaurus herd and saw the bull pacing around the ring of herbivores. The Goliath was nearly twice the size of the bull pachyrhinosaurus, but the territorial herbivore seemed unperturbed by his larger foe. The bull pachyrhinosaurus opened its well-sharpened beak and howled at the carcharodontosaurus, stamping its powerful forelimbs against the earth.

The Goliath roared, rocking the earth underfoot as it charged.

CHAPTER TWELVE– ENANTIODROMIA

The miombo woodlands erupted with the frantic braying and bellowing of the pachyrhinosaurus herd. The herbivorous dinosaurs had formed a protective ring around their infants, trapping Quad Equitum and Stalker Force with them. Zosimus Kaikara and Josef Gustavo struggled to remain standing as the pachyrhinosaurus calves dashed around their legs, squealing with fright. The Goliath carcharodontosaurus howled from beyond the protective ring of agitated adult pachyrhinosaurus, out of sight from the men within the circle.

"Stay in the center of the ring," Andrei Wynn shouted. "The adults won't crush us; they won't risk stepping on their young!"

Zosimus pulled Andrei down to the ground beside him as a thick pachyrhinosaurus tail swung over their heads. Disciple and Quad Equitum were crouched with Josef and Stalker Force. The men had to keep pushing back the frightened pachyrhinosaurus infants that were cowering beside them. Willard Bennington, the rookie of Stalker Force, was the only one that allowed the whimpering calves to huddle against him for comfort.

Zosimus crawled through the dog-pile of young dinosaurs and tried to

look out through the stamping legs of the adults. He saw the Goliath carcharodontosaurus pacing around the ring, hissing through its bloodtarred teeth at the bull pachyrhinosaurus. Each adult pachyrhinosaurus that was faced with the looming carcharodontosaurus would react with a groaning roar, swinging their protruding snouts in the air to fend the predator off.

The Goliath carcharodontosaurus reared its head over the herd and roared at the men and pachyrhinosaurus infants below. The Goliath opened its jaws and lunged for the screaming humans within the center of the protective ring. The bull pachyrhinosaurus crashed head-first into the Goliath's torso, rocking the entire forest with the cataclysmic impact. The Goliath howled and grabbed the bull pachyrhinosaurus's head crest in its talons, pivoting away from the herd.

The Goliath carcharodontosaurus buried its foreclaws into the bull pachyrhinosaurus's bony frill and forced the braying herbivore to the ground. The Goliath began to gnaw at the bull's frill, sawing its serrated teeth through the flesh that covered the bony shield. The bull pachyrhinosaurus bellowed in pain as blood streaked down its face, into its eyes and over its beaked jaws. The carcharodontosaurus pinned the bull's head beneath its powerful hind leg and chewed the flesh on the pachyrhinosaurus's frill to bloody ribbons. Zosimus was on his hands and knees, trying to watch the conflict through the legs of the adult pachyrhinosaurus.

Zosimus found himself staring directly into the eyes of the bull pachyrhinosaurus. The old herbivore's snout was being ground into the undergrowth beneath the Goliath's taloned foot. Zosimus didn't see fear in the golden irises of the bull pachyrhinosaurus; he only saw primitive rage and determination. The bull pachyrhinosaurus blew soil from its half-buried nostrils and wrenched its head to the side, out from under the Goliath's foot. The Goliath hissed as it lost its balance and stumbled backwards, towards the herd.

Zosimus struggled to watch the combat through the clouds of dust being thrown up from the stomping feet of the pachyrhinosaurus herd. He caught a glimpse of the Goliath ducking low through the auburn clouds, growling cavernously through the flesh strung from its fangs. The bull pachyrhinosaurus snorted and threw its head from side to side, tossing the flayed skin from its cranial frill.

The carcharodontosaurus spread its arms and howled as it bounded across the clearing to the bull. The bull pachyrhinosaurus lowered its head and charged towards the Goliath, but the predator quickly feigned out of the way. The Goliath pivoted on its feet and snapped its jaws around the bull pachyrhinosaurus's quill-covered back. Zosimus was still on all fours, watching in a stunned stupor as the ancient

leviathans wrestled across the clearing, tearing apart the forest floor beneath their threshing feet.

The bull pachyrhinosaurus lowered its body to the ground, allowing the Goliath to overpower it. The Goliath pushed the bull to its knees and opened its jaws to deliver the killing blow. Zosimus recognized the look of determination in the bull pachyrhinosaurus's eyes, and he immediately understood the intelligence of the cunning beast. The Goliath attempted to take a bite out of the bull pachyrhinosaurus's neck, but the needle-tipped quills covering its throat caused the carcharodontosaurus to quickly recoil. Zosimus saw the bull pachyrhinosaurus's eyes open wide and knew that its trick had worked.

The bull pachyrhinosaurus suddenly reared back on its hind legs, rising high above the Goliath. Zosimus stared in awe as the bull howled to the canopy, its robust ink-black body cast brilliantly in the shafts of sunlight falling from the tree-tops. Zosimus's jaw dropped as he watched the bull pachyrhinosaurus bring its blunt horn down onto the Goliath's neck. The force of the blow made an audible *whump* that made Zosimus wince in empathetic pain. The Goliath buckled to the earth and quickly crawled away, shrieking like a wraith through broken teeth.

The herd of pachyrhinosaurus barked and chortled through their throats at the sight of the fleeing Goliath. The bull pachyrhinosaurus charged into the carcharodontosaurus from behind, head-butting its hip. The Goliath spat and hissed like a cornered cat as it scrambled away on all fours from the bull pachyrhinosaurus. The Goliath rose to its feet a hundred feet away and hurried off, slinking out of sight beyond a stand of muchesa trees. The bull pachyrhinosaurus looked back to his herd and silenced their overwhelming chorus with a guttural roar of victory.

Zosimus panted heavily, a hand over his heart.

"That's a first," Molnar said.

Lalo Flores and Willard chuckled at Molnar as the herd slowly dispersed from their tightly-held ring. Some of the beta male pachyrhinosaurus resumed foraging while the mothers returned to their frightened infants. Willard looked up from the pachyrhinosaurus calf that he had been petting and saw the muddy eyes of its mother staring back at him. Willard instinctively rose to his feet, but Andrei pulled him back down.

"Wait, comrade," Andrei said. "No sudden movements."

Willard nodded shakily as the mother pachyrhinosaurus loomed over them. The elder female groaned lowly, causing the air to tremble around their heads. The infant pachyrhinosaurus pulled out of Willard's grasp and waddled back to its mother, nuzzling her

calloused snout. The mother pachyrhinosaurus grumbled as it studied Andrei and the other men. Willard and Andrei watched as the pair of herbivores turned away, slowly walking back to the bull pachyrhinosaurus. Willard trembled as he smiled.

"Remarkable," Willard whispered. "They kept us safe."

"Yeah, safe," Syd Kinane said. "They also kept us busy."

"We're losing daylight," Pardus said. "Four hours left."

"Understood," Disciple said. "If we keep moving south, we'll make it to the savanna before nightfall. Everybody; on me."

Disciple waved his hand in a circular motion to rally the rest of the men around him. The group collected into a diamond formation with Zosimus, Josef and Disciple on point, leading Stalker Force and Quad Equitum through the herd. There were several pachyrhinosaurus ahead of them, but Andrei assured the men that if they kept their distance, they would be safe. The bull was far behind them, restlessly pacing amongst his harem.

It made Willard uneasy to see such a battle-hardened titan in a state of stress; the slightest provocation could trigger the alpha male into a hormonal or defensive rampage. During his time doing conservation work in college, as well as in his missions with Stalker Force, Willard had learned the risks that came with territorial herbivores. Willard was distracted from these thoughts when he heard a strange chirping coming from the treetops.

Willard raised his head and saw a bright scarlet-feathered dromaeosaurid, no bigger than a house cat, clinging to an overhanging muchesa branch. The dinosaur was similar in appearance to a velociraptor or a deinonychus, but it was much smaller. The dromaeosaurid was completely covered in fluffy red and black down, with orange and black avian flight feathers extending from its wing-like forearms. Willard noticed that the creature had the same kind of feathers on its back legs as well, indicating that the animal was a fully capable flier - or glider.

"Doctor Wynn," Willard said. "We have dromaeosaurids."

Andrei looked up to the understory canopy where Willard was pointing. He had to raise a hand in front of his glasses to keep from being blinded by the evening sun flaring through the muchesa treetops. Andrei saw the small carnivorous dinosaur and muttered, "I believe it's a *sinornithosaurus*, comrade."

The arboreal *sinornithosaurus* began to appear more frequently as the men ventured deeper through the territory of the pachyrhinosaurus herd. The small dromaeosaurids chirped from the branches of the muchesa trees as they studied the shuffling men below. Zosimus looked through the iron sights of his G3 rifle and watched as a *sinornithosaurus* leapt from the branch it was clinging to. The

sinornithosaurus spread its feathered arms and legs out, turning its descent into a graceful glide. The airborne dromaeosaurid blurred past Zosimus's face like a flash of fire and he recoiled with a startled yelp, nearly dropping his rifle in the process.

Josef chuckled. "Scared of a little birdie, *irmão*?"

"Sim," Zosimus exhaled, putting a hand to his pounding heart. He raised his rifle and watched as the sinornithosaurus circled in the air, banking around the clearing towards a foraging pachyrhinosaurus. The sinornithosaurus spread its wings forward to slow its momentum and landed gently on the pachyrhinosaurus's shoulder. The herbivore didn't seem to notice the miniscule dromaeosaurid climbing over its immense, leathery body.

Andrei stopped walking and put a hand on Zosimus's shoulder.

"Hold on, comrade," Andrei said. "Let's see what it does."

Zosimus watched as the sinornithosaurus crawled over the pachyrhinosaurus like an anole lizard climbing a rock wall. The fiery feathered dromaeosaurid clung to the bulging gut of the pachyrhinosaurus, snapping up mosquitoes and tsetse flies from the herbivore's pebbled skin. Zosimus muttered, "Reminds me of rhinos and those little oxpecker birds that ride around on them. The little oxpecker is safe with the rhino, and the rhino gets cleaned by the oxpecker."

"Dah; it looks like a symbiotic relationship," Andrei said. "I can't imagine any of the sinornithosaurus's predators would risk a fight with a pachyrhinosaurus. In return for his extra muscle, the pachyrhinosaurus gets a free cleaning. Pretty fascinating to see this kind of symbiosis between dinosaurs in the flesh."

"That isn't symbiotic behavior," Willard mumbled, pointing.

The sinornithosaurus was chewing on the skin of the pachyrhinosaurus with fangs that resembled the blades of surgical scalpels. Andrei, Willard and Zosimus watched as fresh blood quickly trickled from the shallow wound. The foraging pachyrhinosaurus groaned apathetically as the sinornithosaurus vigorously lapped up its flowing blood. Andrei began to sway where he stood; he felt dizzy with his sudden understanding.

"We should leave," Andrei whispered. "They're vampiric."

"Vampiric?" Disciple repeated, looking back at Andrei.

A sinornithosaurus landed weightlessly onto Disciple's shoulder. Disciple immediately recoiled and batted the creature away. The sinornithosaurus squealed and flapped its wings, attempting to take flight. Disciple drew his M16 and fired a round into the sinornithosaurus's chest, turning the small carnivore into a cloud of feathers and viscera.

The sudden *crack* of the rifle elicited several alarmed barks and groans

from the pachyrhinosaurus herd. Zosimus heard the bull pachyrhinosaurus bellowing from across the clearing and turned to see the gargantuan beast trotting around its harem. The bloodied bull pachyrhinosaurus was watching the men from afar with its blunt nasal horn lowered.

Zosimus turned to the others and said, "The *bull's* coming, move!" Stalker Force and Quad Equitum began jogging through the herd, weaving around the pachyrhinosaurus that was being exsanguinated by the dromaeosaurid. The sinornithosaurus that was feeding on the pachyrhinosaurus noticed the fleeing men and cocked its head with an inquisitive chirp. With a quick flap of its wings, the sinornithosaurus glided towards the men and landed onto Willard's rucksack.

The sinornithosaurus climbed up Willard's shoulder and buried its slender teeth into the back of his neck. Willard cried out in alarm and grabbed the neck of the sinornithosaurus, yanking its tiny jaws from his nape. The dromaeosaurid's fangs had left a semi-circle of bite marks the size of a thumbprint. Willard folded the sinornithosaurus's neck in half, snapping it as easily as a dry twig. He threw the carcass onto the forest floor and started stomping on it, mashing the body to paste against the dry leaf litter. Molnar rushed forward and pulled the rookie away before he could stop.

"Keep moving," Molnar said. "Get the lead out, Benny!"

"I-I'm-m trying," Willard slurred. He stumbled beside Molnar, dragging his boots through the undergrowth. The wound on the back of his neck was beginning to rapidly bleed. Willard buckled to the forest floor and tried to push himself upright, but his shaking arms refused to support his weight. Lalo and Molnar quickly hoisted Willard onto his feet and started dragging him over to the rest of the team.

Zosimus saw Willard and said, "What the hell happened to *him*?"

"It-it hurts," Willard groaned. "I don't -don't – feel –"

Willard vomited and brackish blood drained from his open mouth.

"Dr. Wynn," Zosimus called out. "We have a situation here!"

"Look up," Andrei shouted. "The situation's over our heads."

Zosimus looked to the canopy and saw dozens of other sinornithosaurus pinwheeling down from the boughs of the miombo trees to feast upon the pachyrhinosaurus herd. Stalker Force and Quad Equitum spun around with their rifles raised as the lecherous dromaeosaurids collectively siphoned blood from the mighty herbivores. Andrei knew that the amount of blood loss for the herbivores would be minimal, but for a human, it could be substantial...

"A lot of vampiric animals have anti-coagulants in their saliva that work as blood-thinners to prevent clotting," Andrei said. "Lalo; is Benny bleeding?"

“Not exactly,” Lalo said. He raised Willard’s head with one hand and pulled one of the rookie’s eyelids open. Willard’s corneas resembled pools of burgundy, spreading around his iris and pupil. Lalo said, “I think he might be hemorrhaging, *jefe*. I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

“Boomslangs,” Zosimus called over his shoulder. He fired a round at a descending sinornithosaurus, turning the animal into a cloud of gory down. “Boomslangs are a kind of viper around here. Their venom has hemotoxins that prevent the coagulation of blood. It causes massive hemorrhaging, from the inside-out.”

“Fuck,” Molnar gasped. He had turned to look at Willard and saw blood dribbling from his ears. Willard’s head lolled back and blood oozed from his eyes, nostrils and open mouth. Crimson tears streamed down the rookie’s gaunt cheeks.

“Get him out of here,” Disciple said. “Hurry!”

Molnar and Lalo started dragging Willard across the forest floor as the other men fired at the sinornithosaurus hopping through the foliage around their feet. A sinornithosaurus flew down from the tree tops and banked towards Josef, but he quickly raised his M14 and shot the airborne animal. The obliterated body of the sinornithosaurus somersaulted through the air and smacked against the lacerated frill of the bull pachyrhinosaurus.

“Shit,” Disciple said. “Turn around, find cover!”

Stalker Force and Quad Equitum scrambled through the undergrowth towards the base of a colossal baobab tree. The baobab towered above the surrounding forest, its thick trunk terminating in creeping roots that stood four feet high. There appeared to be a den beneath the baobab’s curled tendrils; perfect for shelter. Zosimus waved the men to the tree and shouted, “To the baobab! *Run!*”

The bull pachyrhinosaurus roared as it charged after Zosimus, plowing through the undergrowth and kiepersol trees. The other pachyrhinosaurus howled and stampeded away, shouldering past the trunks of miombo trees as they went. Whenever one of the pachyrhinosaurus bumped against a tree, more sinornithosaurus would descend from the canopy like flashes of fire falling from the heavens. A few of the sinornithosaurus flew towards the fleeing men, prompting the soldiers to turn on their heels and blindly fire their rifles in the air.

Molnar and Lalo were still dragging Willard towards the baobab tree. The rest of the team sprinted ahead of them, crawling between the roots and down into a dank den within the base of the baobab. The bull was gaining speed, toppling the understory trees in his way. The miombo trees rocked around the bull pachyrhinosaurus as it charged towards the cowering men. Molnar and Lalo were the last to make it

to the baobab, with Willard howling in agony between them. Molnar shoved Lalo and Willard into the baobab's den, then spun around and aimed his automatic SOW shotgun at the charging bull pachyrhinosaurus. Molnar fired a slug into the side of the pachyrhinosaurus's head, but the shot didn't slow the charging behemoth. Molnar emptied his entire magazine into the bull pachyrhinosaurus's face as it closed the distance to the baobab tree. Molnar took a flying leap towards the baobab just as the bull pachyrhinosaurus swung its head at his feet. The bull pachyrhinosaurus's blunt nasal horn struck Molnar's boots, sending him somersaulting through the open air towards the baobab's root ball. Zosimus and Syd got in the way and Molnar slammed into them, crushing them both against the dirt floor of the den. The recess between the roots was several feet deep, creating a bottle-neck entrance into the dank pit. Zosimus and Syd quickly pulled Molnar into the depths of the dark, cobwebbed hole as the bull pachyrhinosaurus charged head-first towards them.

"Brace yourselves!" Pardus screamed.

The bull pachyrhinosaurus's wide skull slammed against the towering baobab, testing the roots' grip on the soil. The men were knocked back by the concussive force, tumbling further back into the fetid hollow. The bull snorted and brayed, grinding its knobbed snout against the rootwalls as it fought to get at the men cowering within the den. Everybody was shouting over one another in their delirious panic. Willard howled on the ground like a wounded animal as blood rose from the pores of his skin.

Their screams of terror only further enraged the herbivore. The bull pachyrhinosaurus repeatedly slammed its skull against the baobab's thick trunk, causing the tree's expansive canopy to rock and roil tumultuously overhead. The bull pachyrhinosaurus used its muscular forelimbs to burrow between the confining root walls. The tips of the bull pachyrhinosaurus's shoveling claws raked deep grooves in the soft loam inches from Zosimus's feet.

"It's almost got us," Logos shouted. "Somebody kill that thing!"

"*Help,*" Willard screamed. "*God, help me, it hurts*"

"Shut up!" Pardus barked. "Everybody, shut up!"

The men began to quiet down, cowering in the darkness as the bull pachyrhinosaurus huffed and growled with its snout halfway into the den. Fresh blood was still dripping down the bull pachyrhinosaurus's head, drizzling wet and thick onto the men below. The bull was so close that they could only see the pachyrhinosaurus's fierce, flayed face through the narrow opening between the baobab roots.

Willard cried out, "*Make it stop, please, god, make it stop-*"

The bull pachyrhinosaurus bellowed and shoved its snout further into

the den. The pachyrhinosaurus's razor-sharp beak snapped for Zosimus's legs like a triggered bear-trap. Syd shoved both of his hands over Willard's mouth, muffling his cries of pain into a tortured, muffled moan.

"Shut up," Syd hissed, "I swear to god, kid, if you don't-"

"Let go of Benny," Molnar grunted, shoving Syd. "Get off of him!"

"Fuck off," Syd spat, elbowing Molnar. "I know what I'm doing!"

"You're suffocating him, Kinane," Molnar growled. "Back off!"

"*I can't breathe*," Willard choked. "*Please, I can't can't*."

"*Shut up*," Syd hissed. He was practically slavering in his panic as he tightened his hand around Willard's bloody mouth. Lalo and Molnar got on top of Syd and pulled his hands behind his back. Andrei scooped Willard up from the filthy floor of decaying bark and held the bleeding rookie against his chest. Willard's whimpering cries faltered and fell to silence as the men held their breath in the damp darkness. The claustrophobic pit was filled with the infuriated huffing of the bull pachyrhinosaurus.

Scarce light found its way into the den. The bull pachyrhinosaurus glowered at the men, snorting through his nostrils, blowing hot air into the chamber with each rumbling exhalation. After several minutes of silence, the bull pachyrhinosaurus turned away from the baobab and walked back to his herd. Zosimus waited a few minutes before crawling out of the den to see if it was safe to leave. When he looked out through the baobab roots, he saw the bull pachyrhinosaurus staring back at him from across the clearing. Zosimus sighed and climbed back into the pit beside Josef and the Americans.

Daylight passed as they waited in their communal grave. CHAPTER THIRTEEN— PUER AETERNUS

There was no solace for Willard Bennington.

Over the course of three hours, Willard had exsanguinated 3.5 pints of blood through his pores, orifices, and from bouts of projectile vomiting. The damage to Willard's internal organs had left him paralytic and near-comatose. Lalo Flores, the medic of Stalker Force, was watching over the suffering rookie in a field tent beneath the baobab tree. The team had been forced to wait inside of the root-ball den until the bull pachyrhinosaurus and his herd had finally left the area.

With the sun setting behind the western mountain range, Disciple had decided that it would be best to set up camp and wait for the sun's return before departing further south again, to the savanna. A fire was being tended to by James Molnar, Andrei Wynn, and Zosimus Kaikara. Thanatos, Eros and Logos were maintaining a defensive perimeter around the clearing. Pardus, Josef Gustavo, Syd Kinane, and Disciple

were presently convening beneath the baobab tree, deliberating over what to do with the envenomated rookie of Stalker Force. The darkness that settled beneath the canopy of the miombo woodlands was scarcely penetrated by the light of the campfire. Vermillion shards of the dusk sky glowed like dying cinders through the gaps in the treetops. Disciple couldn't shake the feeling of eyes on his back as he knelt beside Pardus at the roots of the baobab tree. The distant whale-songs of giraffatitans and pachyrhinosaurus on the savanna caused his hackles to rise. Disciple flinched whenever he heard the Willard's vomit splashing within Lalo's dimly lit infirmary tent.

Pardus was studying the medallion tied to his ka-bar as the others waited for him to speak. His thumb traced the vertebrae of an Ouroboros - a snake eating its own tail - that was coiled around an Orphic egg embossed on the pendant. A human skull was engraved within the Orphic egg of the Ouroboros. Pardus looked into the septagram that sat like a third eye in the center of the skull's forehead. He kept his eyes on the medallion as he spoke to Syd, Disciple, and Josef.

"That Cuban, Flores, said that the outlook for the rookie isn't good. According to Doctor Wynn, the dinosaur that bit General Jericho's nephew had both hemotoxic venom *and* anticoagulant glycoproteins in its saliva. They're saying so because the rookie is sharing symptoms to both the venom of boomslang vipers and the Draculin glycoprotein found in vampire bat saliva."

"What does that mean for Benny?" Syd said. "Will he recover?"

"Call for an evac," Josef said, lighting a cigarette. "*Pronto.*"

"Can't," Disciple said. "Both radios were lost with the XR311's."

Pardus said, "It wouldn't make a difference; the Cuban said that there's no chance of modern antivenins treating what's happening to the rookie. The dinosaur that bit the kid had anticoagulant glycoproteins in its saliva so that the blood it drinks doesn't clot. Doctor Wynn suggested that the animal's hemotoxic venom does the same thing, but it also attacks red blood cells and destroys tissues. The kid is going to die of organ failure or blood loss, but it's going to take time."

"We can't exactly carry this *garoto* to the collider," Josef said. He tongued the cigarette butt from one corner of his mouth to the other with a pensive look. "His entire body, it's...it's *draining* blood. We would have every carnivorous animal in New Fátima following our trail. Hell, I'm amazed the Goliath hasn't come back here yet. I'm sure the kid is as good as a dinner bell."

Syd shook his head woefully, wringing his hands like a fretful father. "We need to get Benny an evac. He's General Jericho's nephew,

for Christ's sake. We gotta get 'im out of here. It's what Captain Wise would've wanted..."

Pardus let go of the medallion chained to his ka-bar hilt, allowing the onyx pendant to dangle. He stared into Syd's eyes and said, "I'll tell General Jericho everything after the mission is over. I can't be prosecuted the way that you or Disciple can; I'm not officially in the United States Military. Josef; I overheard your partner telling the Cuban that the Portuguese would treat Boomslang envenomation with an overdose of morphine..."

"Sim," Josef said. The cigarette fell from his lips. "It's less cruel..."

"Pardus," Disciple said, slowly turning his head. "You can't possibly be suggesting that we...*euthanize* the kid. You're not making that suggestion, are you?"

Syd's left eye twitched and he croaked, "You wanna kill Benny?"

Pardus raised his hands for silence and said, "Look; we aren't on a military base right now, discussing esoteric concepts like laws or morality. We're in a sovereign nation during a time of war, where we diplomatically aren't supposed to be, and we have a young man dying of organ failure and blood loss. We don't have a radio; an evac is off the table. Our only options are to wait for the kid to die – however long that may take – or we do with him what the soldiers here have been doing for years with boomslang victims. Either we give him an easier way out, or we let him suffer. Those are our choices."

Pardus paused; they could hear the splash of Willard's vomit.

"I've seen enough men die from boomslang bites," Josef said. His voice was low and knotted with unease as he turned to face Syd. "It isn't pretty, *irmão*. If you at least put the kid down with morphine, he won't have to suffer through it. It could take him another three, maybe four hours to die at this rate, but he's going to die no matter what we do."

All eyes were on Syd. Pardus said, "We're losing time, Kinane."

"I won't say nothin'," Syd said, wiping his eyes with a thick thumb and forefinger. "Captain Wise told me 'bout his time in Vulture Squad, when some sniper's spotter was getting ripped in half by a 'raptor they called the 'Cyclops'. The sniper put a bullet in the spotter's head so he wouldn't suffer, 'cause he was already being torn into two pieces..."

Pardus looked at Josef; the bounty hunter nodded solemnly.

Disciple sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. He heard a sharp cry from the medical tent, followed by the crackle and hiss of the campfire. The other three men were watching the CIA agent expectantly. Pardus took a deep breath and threaded his fingers together as he looked into Disciple's tired blue eyes. There was another splash of spilled blood and bile from the medical tent, and Disciple winced. He shook his head and looked away from the men, to

the campfire across the clearing.

"Do it, Pardus," Disciple muttered. "Make it clean; use morphine."

Pardus nodded. "I'll answer for all of this. Jericho will understand."

"Kinane," Disciple said, looking at Syd. "Get Flores and tell him he needs to check on everybody else's wounds; make sure nobody has concussions or needs stitches. I'll have Pardus... 'watch' the rookie. It shouldn't take him more than maybe five, ten minutes."

"What about..." Syd's voice caught in his throat. "...the body?"

"All you need are dog tags," Pardus said. "Burn or bury the rest."

Willard Bennington was trapped in a waking nightmare. The twenty-two year old rookie was lying on a sleeping mat with his fatigue jacket spread open, exposing the blood that was rising like sweat from his clammy skin. Every muscle in his body was clenched taut; his fingers were contorted into claws. A continuous stream of blood seethed through his grinding teeth. The rookie's swollen eyes resembled peeled cherry tomatoes rimmed with ruddy, coagulated blood. His breathing was shallow and rapid, a sputtering hiss interspersed by bouts of violent retching.

From Willard's hallucinatory perspective, the walls of the tent appeared to be breathing; retracting and expanding around his paralyzed body. The bite on the back of his neck had turned necrotic, rapidly eroding to a rotten pocket at the base of his cervical vertebrae. The cool air within the tent felt like flames on Willard's skin as the blood chilled on his body. He was no longer able to form coherent thoughts; Willard's mental faculties had been reduced to the perception of sleep paralysis victim.

Willard no longer had the ability to reflect on his own mortality, nor the necessary sight to look beyond his oncoming demise to any potential afterlife beyond. There was nothing left for his mind to cling to but the all-consuming pain coursing through his dissolving nervous system. Willard could only lie on the sleeping mat and wait for the familiar faces of his squad-mates to reappear as spectators in his own dwindling crawl towards an early grave.

Willard's eyes rolled around erratically in their sockets. Everything in his field of vision appeared in startling clarity, as if every surface had been dusted with crystalline powder. The shadows in the corners of the tent swirled with static electricity that was only perceptible to Willard. The fire outside glowed warmly through the flesh-toned tent walls, the light swelling and receding as Willard directed his focus to it.

The door flap fluttered open, and Willard heard the voices of the men outside. They sounded muffled to him, as though he were underwater. There was a lapse in Willard's perception; a half second of nothing but

utter blackness; then the interior of the tent returned to Willard with an infernal heat and intense vividness. A shadow in the shape of a man was suddenly looming over the rookie, staring into the dying boy's pupils with eyes like the static snow from a TV set.

Pardus shook his head as he stared at Willard. The boy's face was gruesome; blood running black from his nostrils, ears, eyes and skin. Willard hiccupped, spasmed on the sleeping mat, and vomited oily fluids across the soused dirt floor. It seemed to Pardus that the boy was committing a kind of reverse osmosis, and everything within his body was diffusing out. The smell in the tent was repugnant; the paralyzed rookie had already vacated his bowels multiple times. The sleeping mat beneath Willard was saturated with shit, sputum and accumulated pints of the rookie's blood. When Pardus spoke, it was a whisper that became a booming, dissonant baritone inside of Willard's hallucinating mind.

"I don't know if you can hear me, but you're lucky," Pardus's voice thundered through Willard's head. "When the anti-matter bombs start dropping on the United States, all of your loved ones will be incinerated; scorched; turned to ash like the original victims of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Consider this a blessing, to not have to witness it. Your dear beloved Uncle Jericho will be among the first to burn."

Willard's eyes flicked left and right before focusing on Pardus.

"*Hel-*" Willard croaked. "*-elp- me* "

Pardus's hands entwined around the base of Willard's slender neck. It was impossible for the rookie to fight back; he couldn't will any movements into action with his nervous system shutting down. Pardus's fingers felt like daggers forged in a fire to Willard as they clawed around his trachea, clamping the airway shut. Willard's weakening respirations became a soft, whining whistle as bloody tears drained from his bulging eyes.

"Look in my eyes," Pardus whispered. "Don't be scared."

Willard's field of vision shrank to a single pin-prick of light at the end of a mile-long tunnel. He could feel himself sinking within his own body as Pardus's grip tightened further and further. Willard gasped and released the last trace of oxygen from his lungs as his tunnel of vision was pinched shut. The last thing he perceived in the darkness was Pardus's voice, as low and deep as the rumbling growl of the Goliath carcharodontosaurus.

"The war is here," Pardus hissed. "The Aeon of Ouroboros begins."

Willard felt only fire as his conscious mind was reduced to ash.

Zosimus Kaikara scooped a handful of silken soot from the smoldering firepit and rubbed his hands together, allowing the powder to

dissipate like mist between his fingers. He had continued the *Onjoi* tradition of using campfire ashes to wash his hands and brush his teeth throughout his former military career. Some of the other Ovimbundu conscripts had understood his behavior, but most of the Portuguese soldiers had mocked Zosimus for his so-called 'tribal ways'.

Embers popped within the fire pit as the flames reached for the understory canopy. Zosimus could remember sitting around a similar fire as a child with his father and older brother, after their mother had passed. Zosimus couldn't recall how old he had been; he imagined he must have been between nine and eleven years old at the time. Zosimus and his older brother, Eammon, would listen to their father as he told them stories about their ancestors and their gods, *Suku* the creator and his wife *Nyoho Ongongo*, the personification of Mother Nature.

Zosimus's father had been the shaman and chieftain of the *Onjoi* tribe; a position referred to as the *sekulu ocinibaiida*. As the *sekulu ocinibaiida*, Zosimus's father had been tasked with serving as an oracle of *Suku* and *Nyoho Ongongo*. Zosimus and his brother had been told by their father that each living spirit existed as a part of *N'ma*; the breath of their god *Suku* that imbued all earthly bodies with souls. The conscious mind of each spirit was molded a body by the hands of *Nyoho Ongongo*, to serve as archetypes of her own subconscious. Zosimus had been taught to believe that all of reality existed within the dreams of *Suku*, and only in death could the spirit, *N'ma*, return to the true reality in which *Suku* sleeps.

Zosimus had abandoned any idea of an afterlife or the existence of souls after his mother had died. When the chaplains of the Portuguese military told Zosimus about Catholicism and Christ, he viewed the stories as no more real than his father's campfire tales. After seeing the life leave the eyes of his mother, Zosimus had decided to focus his mind on tangible reality. He found no solace through dreams and stories; nothing mattered to Zosimus beyond what he presently saw and understood of physical reality.

Zosimus raised his eyes from the fire when he heard Lalo shouting across the clearing. Zosimus looked over his shoulder and saw Pardus blocking Lalo from the medical tent. Disciple and Syd were standing on either side of Pardus, whereas Lalo was flanked by Molnar and Andrei. Zosimus rose to his feet and started walking towards the arguing men. Josef jogged up to Zosimus and fell in step beside him.

"Quad Equitum can keep watch," Josef said. "What's happening?"

“*Morte*,” Zosimus said. “The child must have died.” “...He’ll have to be cremated,” Pardus was saying, looking at Lalo

and Molnar. “Unless you want to put him in a body bag and stash him somewhere. We can mark the coordinates and retrieve the remains after an evac. Otherwise, we can put him on the fire and make this our campsite for the night. If we leave him here, we’re Oscar Mike. Understand?”

“*Mierda*,” Lalo muttered. He shoved Pardus aside and strode into the medical tent. Lalo called over his shoulder, “You stink of *mierda*, Pardus. *Mierda!*”

Molnar held his automatic SOW shotgun across his waist as he stared at the medical tent. He tapped the trigger guard with one finger in a slow rhythm and said to Disciple, “It must be convenient, losing deadweight when an evac isn’t available. How are you going to break the news to General Jericho that you left his nephew’s remains in an ash-pit, or in a pile of dinosaur dung?”

“Jericho’s feelings aren’t my concern, Molnar,” Disciple grunted.

Lalo stormed out of the medical tent with his fists clenched. He grabbed Pardus by the shoulders and threw him to the forest floor. The Vietnamese mercenary quickly rolled to his feet and spun around to face Lalo. The Cuban medic tackled into Pardus and they both staggered back, shoving and swearing. Syd and Molnar shouted for Lalo to calm down as they pulled him away. Quad Equitum didn’t react to Pardus being assaulted; only Thanatos looked over his shoulder more than once while keeping watch.

“Chill out, man,” Molnar said to Lalo. “Keep a cool head, Flores” “Benny was *murdered*,” Lalo barked. “Pardus killed him!” “You were the one supervising his care,” Pardus said, dusting

himself off. He took his M16 from its sling and held the rifle in both hands while speaking. “How many cc’s of morphine did you give him? I’m not here to tell you how to do your job, but you need to know your dosages, *Cuban*.”

“*Mierda!*” Lalo snapped. He tried to break free from Molnar and Syd, but couldn’t. “Benny was *murdered*! There are strangulation bruises around his neck! You were the last person with him; you had to have killed him!”

Syd grumbled, “Don’t go accusin’ people of shit like that, Flores.”

“Pardus killed Benny,” Lalo shouted. “His throat was bruised!” “His entire fucking *body* is covered in bruises, Flores!” Disciple

snapped. The other men paid attention; they had yet to hear the CIA agent command any real authority. He glanced from Lalo to Andrei as he spoke. “It’s like you both said; he was bleeding internally, and whatever blood couldn’t find its way out of his body was collecting under his skin. If we go back in there and look at him again in an hour, his entire body will be black and purple. We’re not going down this rabbit hole, accusing each other of *murder*.”

“Murder,” Pardus repeated. “I’m no Viet Cong, Flores.” “You act like Viet Cong,” Andrei said. All eyes turned to the Russian scientist. Andrei straightened his posture and said, “You killed those MPLA rebels like the Viet Cong killed your people; no mercy, just butchery by blade. You can’t shrug off these accusations against you when Disciple and I both saw you killing captured rebels.”

“You can call *that* murder, but I call it job security,” Pardus said. “I’ll kill any communist rebel that could cost us this mission for Jericho; Angolan, Russian, Cuban, or otherwise.”

Lalo stared at Pardus. “Is that a threat, *jefe*?”

Syd stood between Lalo and Pardus, his hands raised.

“Flores, I’m telling you to drop it— I’m in charge -”

Pardus grunted, “Listen to your chain of command, *Cuban*.”

“You *murdered* him, Pardus,” Lalo shouted. “You *murdered*-”

Syd swung the meat of his fist into the base of Lalo’s neck, dropping the medic to the forest floor. Molnar rushed forward and shoved Syd back into Disciple and Pardus. Andrei and Zosimus started to help Lalo to his feet, but Syd pushed them both back. The towering soldier leaned forward to look Lalo in the eyes and put a hand on his shivering shoulder. Lalo kept his eyes to the carpet of leaf litter as Syd spoke.

“I’m sorry, Flores,” Syd said. “We just can’t have you throwin’ blame, sayin’ things like ‘murder’. It’s not like that at all. You just don’t understand, Flores”

Lalo pushed Syd away and stumbled back to the tent.

“What are you waiting for, *amigos*,” Lalo panted over his shoulder. He knelt inside of the tent beside Willard’s corpse and hollered out, “We don’t have a lot of time if we’re going to destroy the evidence. It’s like Pardus said; predators will be coming here in no time, and we don’t want Jericho to find out his nephew was *murdered*.”

“Drop the conspiracies, Flores,” Disciple snapped. He looked at the rest of the men and spat in the dirt. “Well, what are you waiting for? Zosimus; take up watch duty with Stalker Force. Josef; Andrei; you’re on crematory duty with Quad Equitum. Let’s get this funeral over

with, people!”

The fire hissed gluttonously, hungry for fresh kindling. CHAPTER
FOURTEEN– UNIO MENTALIS

The miombo woodlands were palpably incensed by Willard Bennington’s broiling corpse. The sulfuric smell of burning keratin mixed with the greasy odor of fat bubbling through the seams in the rookie’s cindered flesh. Cerebrospinal fluid sputtered out of the carcass and sizzled upon the campfire coals, releasing fragrances akin to sage and soldered iron. Willard’s silhouette was slowly dissolving beneath writhing sheets of flame. It would take an entire night of constant conflagration to cleanse the carcass of flesh. After that, Willard’s bones would be left for the dinosaurs to chew on. James Molnar of Stalker Force wouldn’t say it out loud, but he felt it was a fitting funerary rite for the deceased dinosaur fanatic.

The entire forest canopy was emblazoned by the light of the swelling fire. Zosimus Kaikara and Molnar were feeding the pyre while Lalo Flores, Syd Kinane, and Disciple protected the perimeter. Pardus and the mercenaries of Quad Equitum were passed out in their sleeping bags, scattered between the roots of the baobab tree. Zosimus couldn’t understand how they were able to sleep in the infernal fog that had settled within the forest. Zosimus had wrapped his afghan scarf over his mouth and nose, but it was impossible to seal off the motley of smells that inundated the clearing.

“Tell no lies,” Molnar whispered. “Fear not the Lord of Death.”

Zosimus gave Molnar a quizzical look. “*Que?*”

“It’s from the *Bhardo Thodal*; the Tibetan Book of the Dead,” Molnar said. His eyes were watering from the smoke as he watched the fire consume his friend. “I always kept a copy in my rucksack in case of a...*prolonged death*. You’re supposed to read it to the deceased so their spirit can find its path to the next plane of existence. I’m just telling Benny what I wanted to before he passed; to not be afraid of death.” There was a *pop* from within the fire as Willard’s stomach split open. The flames leapt higher as the gases that had been trapped within the cadaver rushed out with a *whoomph*. Molnar and Zosimus each took a few steps back to avoid a sudden flurry of wind-swept sparks. Lalo and Syd both glanced over their shoulders, but neither acknowledged the noisy pyre, nor each other.

Molnar muttered to Zosimus, “Everything would have been different if Captain Wise hadn’t died. None of this would have happened. He wouldn’t have ever let things get this far; accusing each other of murder, burning bodies...that CIA Agent led us all in here blind. If he had just gotten some intel first, Captain Wise and Benny could still be alive.”

“At least it ended quickly,” Zosimus said. “For Xavier, at least.”

Molnar shrugged as he watched the forest beyond the pyre's blazing tendrils. The giraffatitans on the savanna could no longer be heard over the tinder and cartilaginous tissue crackling in the fire. Molnar was trying to ignore the discordant crematory sounds so that he could listen to the animals within the immediate vicinity. Throughout their time beneath the monolithic baobab they had seen wandering families of warthogs; dome-headed pachycephalosaurus; wildebeest; even a gang of lionesses stalking an elderly ankylosaurus. Molnar had heard the Goliath carcharodontosaurus, but the echoing bellows had come from the savanna, further south.

Molnar said, "Captain Wise and Benny have returned to *Pneuma*."

"*N'ma*?" Zosimus repeated. "My father used to use that word."

"*Pneuma*; Greek word forbreath," Molnar said. He grimaced when he heard the air hissing out through Willard's burning lungs. "The consciousness is what stoic philosophers called *pneuma*— the breath of life the soul. All *pneuma* is one; the *pneuma* of Captain Wise and Benny are one with the *pneuma* that permeates all living things in this reality."

Zosimus was silent as his eyes grazed the shadows of the tree-line.

"You surprise me, American. You don't seem like the others..."

"I served under Captain Wise for four years," Molnar said. "He opened my eyes to a lot during that time. Tracking Xipetotec and the utahraptors around the world, we got to see a lot of different cultures; peoples; places. Captain Wise always pushed us to expand our minds and to think for ourselves, to question the traditional teachings of authority. He always said that there was more to reality than just what we could see. Doctor Wynn and Captain Wise never really saw eye to eye on the nature of reality, death or the afterlife."

"You keep saying reality," Zosimus said. "Why?"

"Our present reality is all we can ever know in this life," Molnar said.

"Everything you perceive as reality is constructed by chemical and bioelectrical stimuli within your brain, based on information gathered by your nervous system. We can't perceive the immaterial space in which *pneuma* exists; to us, it would be the black void of nonexistence. People seem to think death is just that; oblivion; and that scares them. I believe in the *pneuma* that breathes life into the empty space in which physical reality is suspended. I'm not afraid of losing my *ego* to death if my *pneuma* continues beyond."

Zosimus glanced at Molnar. "Ego?"

"Carl Jung," Molnar said. "You a fan?"

"*Meu irmão*, Josef, seems to be," Zosimus said. "Carl Gustav?"

Molnar nodded. He brought the SOW shotgun to his shoulder as he studied the darkness shifting between the miombo and muchesa trees.

"The path of individuation, bounty hunter. That's Carl Jung. That's

what got me into this military career to begin with. Unmasking my *Persona*; finding the *pneuma* of *Ego*; stepping through my *Shadow* and coming out the other side. I owe who I am today to the teachings of Carl Jung, Alan Watts, and Captain Wise...”

Molnar kept his shotgun raised and took a step towards the pyre. “Do you feel that, Zosimus? Vibrations underfoot?”

Zosimus raised his G3 assault rifle. “Could be herbivores.” “Or the Goliath,” Molnar grunted. “Movement; twelve o’clock.”

Zosimus and Molnar aimed their rifles at the space between a pair of towering zebrawood trees. Molnar gave a short whistle, signaling Lalo and Syd to come over. The four men stood with their rifles aimed through the fire, to the jungle beyond. Zosimus felt two tremulous rhythms in the ground beneath his boots; a pair of animals were approaching the campsite. If there hadn’t been a body cooking, he would have been able to smell the animals before they arrived.

“Carnivores,” Syd grunted. “Has t’be.”

Eros and Pardus both sat up in their sleeping bags.

“What’s going on?” Pardus coughed. “Talk to me.”

“Animals approaching,” Zosimus called over his shoulder.

Pardus and Eros grabbed their rifles and went to stand beside Zosimus and the soldiers of Stalker Force. Molnar raised a fist for them to halt; a pair of shadows in the shapes of theropods had coagulated in the darkness beyond the fire. The men collectively backpedaled from the fire as a male and female carnotaurus sauntered into the radiant light. The male carnotaurus had a smaller set of horns than the bull from the plateau, and the female appeared to be malnourished. The carnotaurus were each several feet taller than the soldiers, but both animals seemed hesitant to approach.

“They’re hungry,” Molnar whispered. “They look like scavengers.”

“If we hold our fire, they might leave,” Lalo said.

The male carnotaurus sharply inhaled through its puggish snout as it watched the men through the curtain of flame. The female ducked to the ground and sniffed around the charred soil surrounding Willard’s makeshift pyre. Syd chambered his M60 and aimed it the female carnotaurus’s pale scalp, between its diminutive horns. The male carnotaurus turned its narrow head from side to side, its beady eyes blinking dully like a shark’s. The carnivore’s jaws ran wet with viscous saliva and decaying wildebeest viscera. Molnar believed the scavengers were waiting for the men to reclaim their ‘kill’ from the fire.

“Hold your fire,” Molnar whispered. He stared unblinkingly through the iron sights of his SOW shotgun at the female carnotaurus. The animal was huffing rapidly through its open maw as its head bobbed forward and back from the ululating flames, testing the heat. Molnar

said, "You can see the female's ribs; these things are starving. They're desperate, Kinane. So are we. Desperate animals do crazy things." "I ain't scared," Syd growled. "And I ain't lettin' 'em eat Benny." "Keep a cool head, Kinane," Molnar said. "Don't act like an ape." "*They ain't eatin' my friend,*" Syd snapped. "*Not again!*"

The female carnotaurus thrust her head into the fire and bit down on Willard's neck, tugging the carcass free from the engulfing flames. The animal hissed and spat as it threw the sizzling body to the ground. Everybody heard the impact before they saw it; the body split open at the seams and bubbling half-cooked innards washed across the forest floor. Syd bellowed with rage and opened fire with his M60, drilling the female carnotaurus as the male barked and danced across steaming-hot bodily fluids. The other men recoiled, scrambling back from the howling demons.

The male carnotaurus lowered its horned head and barreled through the pyre, scattering the charcoals and firewood into the air. A swirling cloud of embers and soot enveloped the clearing beneath the understory canopy. Everybody was blind in the billowing whirlwind, screaming and firing their rifles as the pair of carnotaurus dashed away from the soldiers. The male carnotaurus lowered its horned head and rammed Eros into the earth, crushing the Israeli mercenary's body underfoot. Syd continued to scream with mindless fear and fury as he blindly drew a line of fire through the blizzard of ash.

Eros howled from where he lay crumpled against the sprawling roots of the baobab tree. Thanatos scrambled towards him through the soot; his boots were still tangled in his sleeping bag. Josef Gustavo was awake and helping Zosimus to his feet; Disciple and Andrei were both awake and watching the chaotic scene in numb disconnection. Lalo sprinted across the tarry clearing to Eros, his boots splashing through the oily puddles of Willard's broiled viscera.

"*Santa Muerte,*" Lalo stammered. "*Santa-Santa Muerte-*"

Eros's limbs were mangled and contorted into crude obtuse and acute angles. Fractured ribs projected through the crumpled pit of his spasming chest cavity. The carnotaurus's toe talons had left three lacerations that stretched from his diaphragm, down through his pelvis and genitalia. Eros's disjointed lower jaw hung vertically against his throat; the distended tongue wriggled from the exposed esophagus. The Israeli mercenary hiccupped and wheezed as his eyes spun weakly in their sockets.

"He's alive," Thanatos gasped. "How the hell is he *alive*?"

Pardus walked over, put his Colt M1911 pistol to the back of Eros's crumpled forehead, and fired a single shot through his skull. Lalo and Thanatos simultaneously recoiled as Eros's head snapped back from the gunshot. The rest of the men came running through the smoke to

surround Pardus and Eros's corpse. Disciple saw Eros's misshapen carcass and dropped to his knees, looking from the bullet hole to Pardus and back again.

Disciple stammered, "You can't do this, Pardus -youyou can't-"

"Again," Lalo said, staring at the CIA agent. "He did it *again*."

"The sad reality of the situation is that members of Quad Equitum are meant to be expendable," Pardus said. "Unlike you 'Special Forces', we exist without identities; histories; documented families. I would be executed on the spot if I ever showed this kind of mercy to an American soldier. If you think I did the same to your rookie, then fine; shoot me. Nobody can stop you. But I'm not going to let one of my subordinates suffer through an agonizing death when I can put him down mercifully. You'd be surprised how much somebody can suffer within seconds, *Cuban*."

Disciple said, "We could have given him morphine, Pardus."

"Mercy?" Molnar huffed. "You mean like mercy for Benny?"

"*I'm sick of hearing this shit*," Syd barked. "Drop it, Molnar!"

"*Enough!*" Disciple snapped, jumping to his feet. He spun around, looking at each set of infuriated eyes blazing back at him. Disciple held his M16 across his waist and fought to steel his composure. "*Enough*. Every man in this outfit will be held accountable for their actions once this operation is finished. Until then, we're not dealing with the dead and dying. If Lalo can't save them, we're moving on. Understand?"

Nobody spoke. Everybody was panting, covering their mouths to avoid breathing the putrid scents of the Willard's obliterated corpse. Only Pardus seemed indifferent to the smells; he simply raised his M16 and turned away from the team. Thanatos and Logos fell into step behind Pardus without saying a word for their fallen squad-mate. Pardus slapped Disciple on the shoulder as he walked past.

"We need a new campsite," Pardus said. "Hurry up."

Without any further deliberations, the rest of the men gathered their gear and followed Pardus through the jungle, south towards the savanna. Disciple didn't bother putting himself on point; he trusted Pardus and the bounty hunters with finding a safer shelter for the rest of the night. He had never taken a life, let alone *seen* a dead body before Pardus killed the MPLA rebels. The smell of Willard's steaming innards clotted in Disciple's throat and sinuses. Everybody reeked of the botched cremation as they shuffled through the forest. After several minutes, most of their bodies had been dusted clean by the dew-dappled fronds of ferns and palm plants.

Willard's malodorous *pneuma* haunted their nocturnal passage.

ANIMUS INDIVIDUATION PHASE III THE MAN OF KNOWLEDGE

“ The third archetype in Animus development is the Man of Knowledge. Through opening the heart as the Man of Adventure, the Animus transmutes into the eyes of men whom dissect reality, be they scientists, philosophers, or even the clergy.”

– Dr. Bruno Moreno

“ People will do anything, no matter how absurd, in order to avoid facing their own soul. One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious.”

– Carl G. Jung

“My conscience doesn’t bother me, I have no conscience. I believe the whole human race should be exterminated. I’ll do my best to do it every chance I get.”

– Carl Panzram

“The doomsday clock has struck twelve...there is no hope left for us or this earth...I pray my family didn’t suffer during the deluge of antimatter bombs...”

– Captain Bruno Moreno

CHAPTER FIFTEEN– ANIMA

The dawn sky above the savanna was iridescent lavender, shimmering with dissolving starlight. It was still possible to see the pearlescent full moon as it dripped ever closer to the western mountain range. Stalker Force and Quad Equitum had spent the remainder of the prior night hiking to the savanna. They had slept along the tree-line at the end of the miombo woodlands, beneath the drooping fronds of flat-topped mufuti trees. Zosimus Kaikara and Josef Gustavo had taken first watch with Stalker Force while the others slept. Disciple and the surviving members of Quad Equitum took the twilight shift; by that time, only two hours of darkness had remained.

Zosimus was kicking and whispering breathlessly in his sleep beneath an acacia tree. Pardus was leaning against the trunk of the acacia with his M16 cradled against his stomach. His left hand was playing with the medallion chained to his sheathed ka-bar. Pardus had his eyes on a family of pale-pink maiasaura that were wandering across the golden plains. The red stripes that covered the bodies of the maiasaura reminded Pardus of the machete wounds that the Viet Cong had left on the bodies of his brothers in Vietnam.

Pardus wondered if Zosimus shared his nightmares.

Zosimus dreamt that he was standing inside of an alcove in the face of a gold-veined buttress, behind the sheet of a roaring waterfall. The landscape of the dream had been sculpted by a childhood memory that Zosimus had attempted to bury with alcohol, marijuana, and hedonistic escape in all its forms. The crashing sheets of the waterfall appeared to be an otherworldly mirror in Zosimus's mind. He saw his reflection as the child he had once been; a gangly young *Onjoi* boy dressed in a gazelle skin that had been dyed red with berry juice. When Zosimus recognized his childhood reflection, he immediately knew that he was trapped within another nightmare.

Zosimus cried out in his sleep as he was ensnared by the memory. Buried beneath the rushing breath of the waterfall, Zosimus could hear the screams of his own mother. Zosimus had his back pressed to the gilded buttress wall; he could feel the cold, slick granite beneath his fingers.

An image was superimposed over the shoulder of Zosimus's reflection in the waterfall. Zosimus begged to himself in his sleep, pleading to remain in the golden alcove. No matter how many times he had ever wished for the dream to play out differently, it never deferred from its chartered course.

Zosimus stared as an image was transposed upon the waterfall's prismatic curtain. It appeared to him that an elephant was just outside, being mauled to death by a ravenous gang of leopards. He could hear the laughter of the leopards, their contemptuous cackling and the cries of the cornered elephant. Zosimus attempted to cover his ears in the dream, but it was impossible to deafen the screams that were being resurrected from his past. The elephant was speaking with his mother's voice, repeating the words that had haunted Zosimus for over a decade.

“*Esuvi! Ekandu, ondele!*”

Zosimus knew the *Umbundu* words; his mother was screaming of soul-takers; demons; evil. The laughter of the leopards began to warp, stretching and slowing until it became the voices of men. It was impossible for Zosimus to divert the dream from becoming a clear memory. He became possessed with the actions he had once taken as a child. Zosimus could only watch through the eyes of his younger self as he ducked beneath the pounding water, passing through the diaphanous veil of the falls.

Zosimus sobbed in his sleep, as he did on every sober night.

A group of Ovimbundu men were gathered on the banks below the falls, circling the prone body of Zosimus’s mother. A man made of shadow was crouched upon her with a kukri machete in hand. Zosimus’s mother howled as the rusted blade cut the clothes away from her body. Zosimus stood paralyzed with fear as the machete-wielding shadow stripped his mother naked. She continued to scream the *Umbundu* words, *esuvi* and *ondele* and *ekandu*, as each of the Ovimbundu men mounted her. By the time the last man had his way with her, Zosimus’s mother was left nearcomatose upon the blood-washed slate.

Zosimus had been too scared to scream when they beheaded her.

Zosimus awoke from the nightmare with a gasp, jumping to his feet with his kukri machete drawn. He blinked and saw the sprawling savanna that separated the miombo woodlands from Mount Chrysopoeia, further south. The quiet plains were an ocean of white and gold grass, obscured only by scattered baobab trees and hillock kopjes. Zosimus heard the familiar music of cinneryis birds singing from the acacia branches above him. A giraffatitan flanked by elephants bellowed on the western horizon, its long neck sweeping across the descending moon.

Pardus cleared his throat from behind Zosimus. “Bad dreams?” “*Sim*,” Zosimus exhaled, sheathing his old kukri. He sat back down on his bed of crushed loudetia grass and held his head in his hands. “Nightmares, every night every night I’m sober.”

Pardus knelt in the grass across from Zosimus. “What of?”

“Leopards,” Zosimus grunted. “Leopards killing an elephant.”

“They’re just animals,” Pardus said, with a dismissive wave of his hand. “You know, ‘Pardus’ is actually latin for ‘Leopard’. It’s where the word ‘Panther’ comes from. I took the call-sign from the name of a

counterguerilla outfit I used to serve with, 'the Panthers'. The name has since evolved as I've come to understand the nature of fear. To me, the leopard is the embodiment of man's fears. Are you afraid of leopards, bounty hunter?" "I'm not afraid of leopards," Zosimus grunted. "Only mankind."

"Animals serve well as archetypes," Pardus said. He pointed to the giraffatitan and its elephant followers, dissipating on the western horizon. "Take the elephants, for example. We had those in Vietnam, before the dinosaurs wiped them out. To me, elephants represent maternity; wisdom; strength and empathy. It would be easy to identify elephants with motherhood, just as the leopard and panther can be understood as archetypes of fear, as an embodiment of that natural element. I was never afraid of wild animals back in Vietnam; just the Viet Cong. I adopted the name Pardus as a way to adopt my fear; to use it as a tool to shape the minds of my enemies, consciously and subconsciously."

Zosimus watched as the elephants dissolved within a mirage.

"I lost my family to the Viet Cong," Pardus continued. "I was an adolescent at the time; I couldn't stop the guerillas when they butchered my father and raped my mother. I had to hide as they razed our family's thatch hut with my brothers inside. Those men burned my entire village to the ground; they did the same to my motherland as they did to my mother and father. I'm not afraid of people anymore. Now, I give them fear - the same fear I had once felt - and I use it to control them. Do you understand, *irmão*?"

"Don't call me *irmão*," Zosimus grunted. "We are not brothers."

"We may have more in common than you suspect," Pardus said, shrugging. He was watching the men of Stalker Force as they stashed their equipment away for the long day ahead. "Just between us; I don't have any shame for turning my back on my motherland. You shouldn't feel any remorse for leaving this blood-hungry whore, Angola. If we want to reshape the world to prevent these wars from happening, we need power. All power is derived from the procurement of fear, from both the powerful and the powerless."

Disciple yelled across the clearing, "Come on, rise and shine!"

"In a minute," Pardus called over his shoulder. To Zosimus he said, "You know this, bounty hunter. I can see it in your eyes. Your *shadow* can't hide itself from me. If we want to live in a world without war, we require the power to reshape the world itself. I didn't take this job leading Quad Equitum for the money; I did it for the chance to stop the endless cycle of bloodshed. I found a group of people with the power to make this happen, and I think you should join me with them after this mission is over."

Zosimus grabbed his ruck sack and G3 assault rifle and stood upright.

“This is all very interesting, but I’ve heard plenty of *sabedoria* before. I’m not seeking any further wisdom or guidance.”

Pardus grabbed Zosimus by the arm and said, “Ordo Ouroboros.”

Pardus unsheathed his ka-bar and held out the pendant strung from the hilt for Zosimus to see. “This is what I’m offering to you, bounty hunter. The power to shape the world. I am a member of this private collective known as *Ordo Ouroboros*. Our members are all over the world, in every civilized society across the earth, ever since the order was formed in the Kingdom of Canaan, thousands of years ago. I am offering you membership in this group, bounty hunter.”

“What about Quad Equitum?” Zosimus said. “That was your offer.”

Pardus put an arm around Zosimus’s shoulder and pulled him closer. Pardus whispered into his ear, “Quad Equitum is a paramilitary group that is privately owned by the man that brought me into Ordo Ouroboros. We’ve recently traded ownership from General Amadeus Jericho to this man, Solomon Aquino. He’s the owner of Axis Mundi Corporation. Mr. Aquino is a very powerful military contractor working in the fields of energy research. Mr. Aquino first invited me to join back in April, after he purchased Quad Equitum from General Jericho.”

Zosimus said, “Does Disciple know of this...*Ordo Ouroboros*..?”

“Disciple wouldn’t understand Ordo Ouroboros,” Pardus said. “He isn’t even aware of their existence; most men will never even hear their name. Ordo Ouroboros is a group of people that are actively working to shape this world into one that will exist without war. All it takes is understanding fear; controlling the powers that sculpt this reality. We call it shadow work; the dark night of the soul; *nigredo*. Even artists and writers understand this...all of cognizant creation is a development of shadow work.”

“Shadow work,” Zosimus repeated. “Do you mean black-ops?”

“No,” Pardus grinned. “But my work in Quad Equitum is, yes.”

Zosimus shrugged apathetically and looked to where the rest of the men had gathered around Disciple. Josef Gustavo was speaking to Syd Kinane and pointing at Disciple’s map, a cigarette hanging lazily from his lips. Zosimus wanted to at least speak to Josef about the offer; he refused to make any business deals without his brother by his side. Pardus sheathed his ka-bar and said, “This is a secret between you and me, bounty hunter. Just so you know, every member of Quad Equitum has lost a loved one to war. Thanatos’s father died while fighting the Nazi’s during the second World War”

“I’ve never heard of these...” Zosimus grunted. “Not-see’s?”

“-Eros’s children were killed by Egyptians during the Yom Kippur War,” Pardus continued. “Logos’s brother died in Vietnam as well; the kid had been drafted out of college and ended up dying alone in a

shit-filled punji-pit. He was found weeks later by Vulture Squad. Every member of Quad Equitum has expressed interest in becoming members of Ordo Ouroboros. I hope you'll consider joining us after this mission. The rest of Ordo Ouroboros are currently working towards the Aeon of Ouroboros." Zosimus stared at Pardus's face; he was trying to find the joke. "Aeon of Ouroboros," Zosimus muttered. "You're serious?"

"I am," Pardus said. "The Aeon of Ouroboros is something that Ordo Ouroboros has been working towards since their inception, thousands of years ago. It is inspired by concepts from Judaism and Christianity; the Old Testament; the story of the Garden of Eden. Ordo Ouroboros has been working for millenia to bring our present world back to a state of paradise."

"Missionary speak," Zosimus chuffed, shaking his head.

"No," Pardus said. "Not like the missionaries from Europe that once pestered your family in Angola, or mine in Vietnam. This idea of a modern Garden of Eden...some Americans call it an 'Age of Aquarius'. Ordo Ouroboros has scientists in every country working towards bringing about this age of technological miracles without war; plague; famine or death. Think of a fire, Zosimus. Our world is wooden, decayed and black. All it takes is the right fire to dissolve the old tinder to fertile white ash for regrowth. Do you understand, bounty hunter?"

Zosimus looked away; the others were preparing to leave.

"What fuel are you using for this...Aeon of Ouroboros?"

"You'll find out," Pardus smiled. "Once this mission is over."

Zosimus shook his head. "I'm not interested, Pardus..."

"What power can't possess, money will buy," Pardus said.

"Maybe if you ask *meu irmão*," Zosimus said. "But not me."

Pardus fell silent as he watched the Ovimbundu bounty hunter walk to the rest of the men across the clearing. Disciple was back on point, leading the group with Josef and Zosimus at his side. The surviving members of Stalker Force and Quad Equitum organized into a diamond formation with Andrei Wynn in the center. Pardus winked at the Russian scientist as he went to join them. Andrei shuddered and looked away. Pardus couldn't help but wonder if Andrei ever missed his own family.

In the hours that passed as the men embarked for the watering hole, the sunrise had transformed the violet dawn sky into a burnt-red African morning. The men marched in formation across sprawling plains of parched and pallid trident grass that scraped the soot from their filthy fatigues. The arid heat dried the sweat on their bodies to salt that chafed their chapped skin. Each breath taken by the trudging men further parched them. Disciple was leading the way with a

compass in one hand and his map in the other. He glanced at both, then pointed to an uphill slope ahead.

“The abandoned mine, *Panopolis*, is below this hill,” Disciple called over his shoulder. Andrei was a few steps behind him, surveying the sprawling savanna with a pair of binoculars. He was careful with his footing as he walked, cautiously high-stepping over hidden stones and the withered husks of olive tree logs. He directed the binoculars to the west and saw a family of springbok running down the ridge road, kicking up clouds of dust as they were pursued by a carcharodontosaurus.

Andrei stopped to watch the pursuit on the ridge road; Molnar and Lalo paused to join him. They stood together and collectively stared at the plumes of red sand rising like smoke from the beveled cliff face. The carcharodontosaurus in pursuit of the springbok had an ashen white body, with blazing red and orange vertical stripes like the Goliath. A juvenile carcharodontosaurus was trotting after the pale adult. The distant theropods howled as they thundered down the shimmering red granite; the acacia trees on the savanna trembled with their reverberating echoes.

The Goliath returned the roar from the eastern savanna.

“There’s two more carcharodontosaurus,” Andrei said.

Zosimus took the binoculars from Andrei’s hands and peered through them at the predators on the cliff face. The juvenile was roughly 20 feet long and 9 feet tall; around the same size as the carnotaurus.

Zosimus watched as the juvenile ran ahead of the adult carcharodontosaurus, nipping at the hooves of the leaping springbok. The juvenile was pale red in color, with black stripes that looked like pyrography burns. The adult carcharodontosaurus always remained within ten meters of its younger companion.

“Looks like a Mother...” Zosimus said. “And its infant.”

“We’ll call her Mother Gaia,” Molnar said. He held a hand over his brow as the rising sun reflected off of the rock wall. “Holy Mother Gaia with her son Prometheus, bringing the gift of fire for mankind. You think they’re with the Goliath, Doctor Wynn?”

Andrei flinched as the juvenile carcharodontosaurus shrieked.

“Impossible to tell,” Andrei said. “And we should keep it that way.”

Zosimus stared through the binoculars at the juvenile carcharodontosaurus, the one that Molnar had called ‘Prometheus’. The juvenile was diminutive compared to its mother, but it easily dwarfed the fleeing herd. Zosimus watched as Prometheus pounced onto a springbok straggling at the back of the herd, mashing the small antelope to a furry paste against the granite road. The Mother Gaia nudged her infant away from the pulped mass as the rest of the springbok herd bounded away.

“Why do you name the animals?” Zosimus asked. He was still looking through the binoculars at the Mother Gaia carcharodontosaurus and her feasting infant. It reminded him of the mother leopards he had seen as a child; they were always wary when their cubs were eating. Scavenging lionesses and hyenas were always a threat to a leopard’s fresh kill. Zosimus said to Molnar, “Xipetotec; the Goliath; the Mother Gaia and Prometheus. What do they mean?”

“They’re named after religious, mythological icons,” Molnar said.

“Captain Wise always had this idea, this concept that animals are totems of the mind and soul. The mind and soul of any person can be equated with totemic animals; your fear is the baboon, or your ferocity is the leopard. These predators, like the utahraptors and tyrannosaurs, and whatever you call these things”

“Carcharodontosaurus,” Andrei said.

“-These carcharodontosaurus,” Molnar continued, winking at Andrei.

“They represent something bigger than just what we see in ourselves. In our eyes they seem less like animals and more like gods and monsters. When I look at these massive predators, I don’t just see danger. I see totems of the earth itself. The legends that inspire us as people and story-tellers. These animals are evidence of something more substantial than ourselves; they’re the embodiment of earth’s essential nature that we’ll never be able to truly comprehend, but can relate to.”

“Dah,” Andrei said. “That, and dinosaur names can be confusing.”

“Some are hard to pronounce,” Lalo said. “Nicknames are easier.” “My mother would have called them *ondele*; demons,” Zosimus said, handing the binoculars back to Andrei. “Or *esuvi*; soul-takers.”

“Shit, man,” Molnar said. “We should let you name the next one.”

“Are we done with the discussion?” Disciple said, looking over his shoulder. The rest of the group had come to a stop in the waist-high trident grass. “The old iron-ore mine is past this hill, in the center of the lower savanna basin. One of the mountain streams was redirected to fill the mine when it was abandoned by *Panopolis Mining Corporation*, back in the early 1900’s. Since then it’s become a watering hole.”

“A hot spot for herbivores,” Lalo said. “Si?”

“And carnivores,” Andrei muttered. “Unfortunately.”

“If we follow the mountain tributary that feeds the watering hole, we can trace it back to the main river that runs down from Mount Chrysopoeia,” Disciple said. “Based on the map that General Cavalera provided, we know there’s an old shipping outpost located on the Akhmim River where it connects to the iron ore mine tributary. If we make enough time, we can set up camp there for the night. Otherwise, we could try to find a boat by the dock. The Akhmim River should

take us straight to the collider.”

“And away from the MPLA,” Pardus said. “Right?”

Thanatos chuffed, “We’ll meet the cunts there either way.”

“The MPLA are after gold,” Zosimus grunted. “Not technology.”

“One and the same, bounty hunter,” Pardus said. “The blueprints for the collider alone would be worth billions to the right buyer. Whoever takes control of that facility will take control of the future for this entire country. The Cubans will be after it first. There are over twenty-five *thousand* Cuban military specialists being flown into this country right *now*, as part of Operation Carlota. I imagine Che Guevara’s special forces, *El Leóns*, are already in the area. That’s if the Portuguese revolutionaries provided intel to the MPLA and their Cuban benefactors.”

Josef lit a cigarette and said, “Can’t rule anything out, *irmão*.”

“Speak of the devil, and he shall appear,” Logos said. He was watching the ridge road through the telescopic scope of his FR-F1 sniper rifle. “We’ve got more than just dinosaurs coming down that ridge road, Pardus.”

Logos handed the FR-F1 sniper rifle to Pardus and pointed to a pair of orange dust devils rising from the ridge road. Pardus looked through the FR-F1 scope and spotted a pair of drab brown BRDM-2 armored patrol cars cruising down the rough-hewn granite. The vehicles resembled the Bravia Chaimite armored personnel carrier that Quad Equitum had driven into Kuito, but smaller and more compact.

Pardus handed the FR-F1 rifle back to Logos and said, “We have two Soviet-made recon vehicles coming down the ridge road. I can guarantee that they’re Cubans. No MPLA forces would have access to those kinds of vehicles.”

Disciple checked his watch. “We’re running out of time...”

“It seems to be a scouting party,” Pardus said. “Those BRDM’s can only carry up to four or six people at a time. For all we know they may be convening with the MPLA camp at the edge of the jungle, on the southern end of the savanna. If we can cut them off there, we can eliminate any possibility of them reaching the collider before us.”

“That’s a very big *if*,” Molnar said. “You scared, Pardus?”

“No,” Pardus muttered. “I’m thinking ahead.”

“We’re not engaging with them unless the situation demands it,”

Disciple said. He held his rifle and continued to climb up the sloping plain. “If we know those Cuban *Leóns* are heading to the collider, Quad Equitum can take control of the situation. Now let’s keep moving.”

“They could be goldsmugglers,” Josef said. “*Panopolis*, right?”

“*Sim*,” Zosimus said. “So the legends say, *irmão*.”

The sun seemed to climb in sync with the men as they marched south,

towards the dark form of Mount Chrysopoeia. Nebulous black clouds were beginning to grow like lesions upon the cascading, forested hills below the mountain. A storm front was preparing for the journey north to the sun-parched plateau. Zosimus believed the rain would arrive by nightfall to quench the savanna. It would be imperative for the men to find shelter by sunset, when the falling clouds would finally crash into the basin.

Disciple was the first to crest the top of the graduated plain. He stood in the shade of a skeletal *mu'unze* acacia and whistled as he looked down into the lower basin. From his perspective on the hill-top, Disciple could see across the entirety of the savanna, all the way to the jungles surrounding Mount Chrysopoeia. The eastern horizon appeared to stretch across to the other end of the earth as an amorphous blend of beige and gold, marred by jutting red-rock spires and tree-covered kopjes.

Zosimus and Josef stood on either side of Disciple as they stared across the basin. Zosimus gasped when he saw the abandoned iron ore mine, Panopolis; the flooded reservoir was a mirror image of the sun where it shone in the center of the savanna. Innumerable species of palm trees ringed the disc of gold like an emerald-studded halo. Throughout the pallid plains surrounding the reservoir were grazing herds of pachyrhinosaurus, maiasaura, elephants and giraffatitans. Zosimus was indifferent to the sight of the animals; he was transfixed by the golden oasis.

"I know this place," Zosimus whispered. "I've been here before."

"No we haven't, *irmão*," Josefsaid. "Not during the War."

Zosimus stared deeply into the gilded waters of Panopolis. "No, *irmão*," Zosimus whispered. "This is where my mother died."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN– CASSINGA RAID

The sun reached its zenith in the crimson sky as the men of Stalker Force and Quad Equitum descended upon *Panopolis*. The Panopolis iron ore mine had once covered four square miles during their height of production in the mid1800's. After the site was abandoned, a mountain tributary was redirected from the Akhmim River to flood the open-air mine. The reservoir had shrunken to an oasis the size of a football field after nearly 200 years of being filled with mud, sand and silt. Rows of fan-topped raffia palms shaded the powdered white shores of the lagoon. Elephants and duck-billed maiasaura circled the forested banks of the reservoir, foraging on lala palm fronds as Oxpecker birds fluttered around their enormous bodies.

Zosimus had last seen the oasis of *Panopolis* when he was a child in the *Onjoi* tribe. The *Onjoi* tribe had become nomadic after the *Baixa de Cassanje* revolt erupted in 1961, when indigenous Angolans staged violent protests against the working conditions of a Portuguese-owned

cotton plantation. The Portuguese government responded to the uprising with military air-strikes on rural villages that resulted in an untold number of civilian casualties; the estimations ranged as far from 700 to 7,000. Holden Roberto, the future leader of the FNLA, organized a violent insurgency within Angola's *Bakongo* region in retaliation.

Over a thousand Portuguese-Angolans were butchered, raped, and burned alive during Holden Roberto's riots. Plantations, police stations, bridges, colonial government facilities, and entire neighborhoods were bombed and razed by the rebels. Within nine months, the revolt was put to an end by the Portuguese military. The counter-insurgency campaigns by the colonial military forces had resulted in the destruction of countless villages and an estimated 20,000 indigenous Angolan deaths.

The *Baixa de Cassanje* revolt was the first predicate for the decade-long War for Independence in which Zosimus and Josef had fought. Zosimus's father, the *Sekulu Ocinibaiida* of the *Onjoi* tribe, had led them into the wilderness of the New Fátima region to escape the rising conflict. The violence that followed the *Baixa de Cassanje* revolt eventually made its way to the *Onjoi*'s temporary settlement outside of Panopolis.

A small subset of the original forces led by Holden Roberto, the *União das Populações de Angola*, had also fled to the abandoned *Panopolis* iron ore mine to evade the wrath of the Portuguese military. Zosimus's father had warned the *Onjoi* tribe that the runaway rioters were looking for more than refuge; they were after the gold within the heart of *Nyoho Ongongo*, their Mother Nature. Zosimus discovered the gold inside the heart of *Nyoho Ongongo*, hidden behind a waterfall. When he took his mother to see the golden veins within the face of the buttress, the rebels had been lying in wait for them...

"...When I showed my mother the gold, a leopard devoured her..."

"So the rumors are true," Josef whispered. "It's a literal *gold mine*."

"If it hasn't already been raided," Zosimus said. They were slowly approaching the flooded mine with their rifles held up to their cheeks. Ostriches and red-feathered gallinules were trotting through the plains surrounding the oasis, darting around the spacious acacia and baobab trees. The pachyrhinosaurus herd from the miombo woodlands moved as one amoebic mass through the palm trees, into the reservoir-turned-watering hole. The men of Stalker Force and Quad Equitum were silent as the still air became filled with the splashing and jubilant chortling of the herd.

All that remained of Panopolis's mining equipment were dismantled skeletons of rebar and iron, rusted fossils half-buried in the sands of the savanna. An abandoned worker's camp was positioned on the

southern end of the reservoir. The wooden shacks had been left to rot, wither and bake with each passing season, blanketed beneath finger-leaved cassava vines.

Zosimus and his mother had often walked to the abandoned worker's camp on moonlit mornings to dig up cassava tubers for making flour and *impala* alcohol. It was on one of these journeys to the oasis when the runaway rioters had first seen Zosimus's mother, while walking past the abandoned worker's camp. The rebels had stalked her until Zosimus inadvertently led them to the gold-concealing waterfall. The men had come for two treasures, but only found one; that treasure was left for the *Onjoi* to find, raped and beheaded as a warning to stay away from Panopolis.

"Why hadn't you told me about this place?" Josef whispered. "We could have been retired in Europe by now if you had, *irmão*. This is our motherland, after all. Her bounties are ours for the taking. She owes us this gold. The Portuguese government doesn't deserve to jump ship with our birthright."

"I don't want gold," Zosimus grunted. "I want to leave."

"One and the same, *irmão*," Josef said. "One and the same."

The savanna shook beneath Zosimus and Josef's boots as a pair of giraffatitans trudged towards the watering hole; a mother and her calf. The mother giraffatitan had a beige complexion, with deep brown markings speckling her shoulders. The calf was the size of an elephant, toddling with the awkward gait of a baby deer through the palm trees surrounding the oasis. It was difficult for Disciple to keep an even footing as he walked on point, leading the men into the shade of the forest. Baboons were squealing and chattering beneath the raffia palms as they fought with quill-covered psittacosaurus for fallen fruit.

The storm clouds that had fallen from Mount Chrysopoeia were beginning to stretch into a black wall that cascaded over the southern horizon. Heat lightning sporadically crackled and webbed across the darkening storm front. The reddening mid-day sky was slowly being enveloped by the encroaching black thunderclouds. The animals surrounding Panopolis weren't perturbed by the changing weather; occasionally an antelope or a pachycephalosaurus in the savanna would turn its head towards the storm, but their attention ended almost as instantly as it was captured.

Disciple held his fist up to halt the group when they reached the shore of the flooded open-air mine. Zosimus and Josef took point beside the CIA agent and knelt at the wide base of a fifty foot raffia palm leaning over the water's edge. Dozens of pachyrhinosaurus were sloshing through the muddy pool, sinking thigh-deep as elephants sprayed water over the herd, casting rainbows in the waning sunlight. On the

opposite shore, a fledgling group of rhinoceros were begrudgingly making room for a family of groaning ankylosaurus. The light that fell through the jagged fronds of the canopy was lost within the dust being thrown up by the shuffling feet of wildebeest, zebra and maiasaura. Crouched beside Pardus and Thanatos, Logos was aiming his FRF1 sniper rifle at the worker's camp across the reservoir. The plank-wood bungalows were visible through the high powered scope, nestled just beyond a stand of scarlet-flowering legume trees. Logos peered at each of the vine-covered shacks until he noticed newly-made structures; hand-made adobe brick shelters topped with thatching-grass roofs. The two drab-brown BRDM-2 recon vehicles from the ridge road were idling beside one of the adobe shelters, where a steady column of wood-smoke rose through a chimney port in the thatch ceiling. "Tango's spotted," Logos said. "The Cubans are across the pond." "The MPLA rebels were telling the truth," Pardus said, turning to Disciple. "The rebels we interrogated claimed that they had a village by Panopolis, and this confirms it. They've turned the abandoned mine into a temporary camp. We can take care of this problem now, while they're distracted. All it would take is five minutes to clear these communists from our path."

"Forget it," Disciple grunted. "We can't risk a fire-fight."

"Pardus has a point," Syd said. "Get 'em while they ain't ready."

"That's not our job, *jefe*," Lalo said. "We're just hunters."

"Shit, I've hunted everything," Syd said. He hocked up gritty phlegm and spat on the sandy forest floor. "Back in 'Nam, I hunted the commies with Tiger Force. I don't have any problem huntin' down some more commies if it means not lettin' 'em get their hands on the collider. What'd Captain Wise die for if we don't stop them? I ain't lettin' his and Benny's deaths be in vain."

"We're not stopping it," Molnar muttered. "We're covering it up."

"Keep your seditious conspiracies to yourself," Disciple growled.

Molnar grunted, "Just doing my civic duty, Uncle Sam."

The men were silent for a moment as they studied the enemy encampment across the reservoir. Zosimus was watching the mother giraffatitan as she stood over her drinking infant. The shadow cast from the mother's body carved a perfect silhouette upon the glittering gold waves of the oasis. The juvenile giraffatitan had a short, thick neck that barely kept the animal's head above the elephants drinking beside it. Zosimus pointed past the giraffatitans to the south-east quadrant of the reservoir, where the mountain tributary flowed into the flooded mine.

"There," Zosimus said. "Follow that stream to the Akhmim River."

Josef slapped his partner's shoulder. "Good eye, *irmão*."

There was an uproar of animal vocalizations from the savanna, west of

the oasis. Zosimus turned to the right and saw several gallimimus speeding through the palm forest, sprinting past Stalker Force and Quad Equitum to the eastern plains. Zosimus and Josef glanced at one another in confusion as the herbivores surrounding the reservoir became vocally agitated. Andrei took the binoculars from his neck and looked towards the west, where the gallimimus had fled from. An explosive roar resonated from the grassland past the rows of skeletal palm trees.

Andrei dropped the binoculars. "The Mother Gaia - she's coming."

"Time to go," Disciple said. "Everybody, head for the stream."

Zosimus and Josef took point with Disciple, creeping along the tree-line on the eastern shore of the lagoon. Logos kept his FR-F1 sniper rifle aimed at the former worker's camp as Thanatos guided him around the narrow palm tree trunks. The families of maiasaura and water buffalo were galloping eastward, following the gallimimus to the open plains beyond the oasis. Every palm tree-top was swinging through the open air as the ground rumbled beneath hundreds of hurried feet. The only animals that remained were the pachyrhinosaurus, ankylosaurus and giraffatitans.

"Hurry up," Pardus whispered. "Get this moving feast underway."

Logos stared through his rifle scope and said, "Cubans in sight."

Pardus looked across the reservoir and saw a dozen Cuban soldiers dressed in beige fatigues, filtering out of the workers' camp. The leader of the group was easily discernible by his regal, lengthy beard and black officer's beret. Several Ovimbundu men in khaki clothes with AK-47's were following the Cubans out of their adobe huts and ivy-swathed shacks. The MPLA rebels were gesticulating rapidly as they yelled at the Cubans, pointing and waving their arms towards the footsteps thundering closer from the western plains.

"She's here," Molnar whispered. "The Mother Gaia."

The herbivorous dinosaurs that remained around the oasis fell silent as the Mother Gaia carcharodontosaurus cautiously emerged through the tree-line. The full-grown theropod had to duck her head beneath the overarching raffia palms as she stepped into the showering sunlight. Her body was as pale as cold soot, with vertical red and gold stripes burning against her ashen hide. The Mother Gaia carcharodontosaurus's juvenile offspring, the 'Prometheus' carcharodontosaurus, stood beneath her cinderblack abdomen.

Prometheus chirped inquisitively, cocking his head like a young dog at each of the herbivorous dinosaurs on the shore-line.

The pachyrhinosaurus herd collectively rose from the reservoir, sheets of silt and water pouring off of their bodies as they climbed the banks to get away. The Mother Gaia hissed softly as she watched the animals pass. A trio of ankylosaurus along the shoreline began to groan in

agitation, pounding their tails against the compacted sand. The curious colobus monkeys and sinornithosaurus clinging to the upper branches of the lala palms quickly vacated their roosts when the Mother Gaia bellowed back at the ankylosaurus.

"We gotta git," Syd said. "We can come back for the commies."

"Right," Pardus said. "The Cubans can wait until the night is dark."

Prometheus darted out from beneath his mother and sprang into the reservoir. The bull pachyrhinosaurus turned and barked viciously at the spry young carnivore splashing in the mud. Prometheus's red body shone bright like an ember as the predator lunged head-first into the churning water to catch fish and turtles. One of the ankylosaurus on the shore gave a guttural howl and swung its clubbed tail through a raffia palm, snapping the tree's trunk in half. Prometheus shrieked and splashed back to his mother when the felled raffia collapsed into the pool.

Zosimus silently watched from the undergrowth as the Mother Gaia purred and nuzzled her whimpering offspring. The three ankylosaurus edged closer to the pair of carcharodontosaurus, grunting and thumping their tail clubs against the palm trunks. Several more trees collapsed around the shore, splashing up water and clouds of sand. The Cuban soldiers in the worker's camp were watching the scene unfold from the safety of their BRDM-2's. A few of the Cubans that were still outside were pointing and laughing at Prometheus as the juvenile cowered beneath the Mother Gaia.

The Mother Gaia roared with such force that it caused the water in the reservoir to slosh against the ivory bank. The three ankylosaurus immediately fell silent and backed away to their corner of the watering hole. Prometheus leapt out from behind his mother and sprang across the lagoon to antagonize the ankylosaurus, but an authoritative bark from the Mother Gaia halted the juvenile in his tracks.

Andrei watched through his binoculars as the young carcharodontosaurus frolicked in the now-vacated watering hole. The Mother Gaia lowered her lengthy body onto the sand to rest, no longer paying any attention to the herbivores lining the shore.

"Interesting," Andrei muttered. "Just like leopards; the solitary mother rearing her young alone; bringing them along for the hunt. We've rarely ever observed this in dinosaur behavior. Most of the animals we've seen either abandon their young at birth or stay loyal from the cradle to the grave. The infant is unpredictable – he's our greatest risk at the moment, if he draws his mother's attention to us."

The tumultuous roar of the Goliath carcharodontosaurus exploded from the eastern plains. The sound was instantly followed by the echoing shrieks and howls of the herbivorous dinosaurs that had

originally fled from the oasis. The Cuban soldiers across the reservoir hurriedly climbed into their BRDM-2's and gunned the engines. The MPLA rebels dashed around their weatherworn bungalows, tearing the ghillie netting off of several wellbeaten jeeps. The corrugated jeeps coughed black smoke as they followed the Cubans' armored vehicles away from the oasis, south towards Mount Chrysopoeia.

"We're trapped," Molnar whispered. "Any ideas, Uncle Sam?" "Head for the mountain tributary," Disciple said. "To the river."

The immense black body of the Goliath heaved through the palm trees on the opposite bank from the Mother Gaia. Prometheus squealed at the sight of the rogue male carcharodontosaurus and quickly crossed the lagoon back to his mother. Prometheus whimpered like a whipped pup as he hid behind the Mother Gaia, now on her feet. The Mother Gaia bared her chiseled fangs at the Goliath and growled in what seemed to be an endless drone. Zosimus put a hand to his heart; he could feel the MotherGaia's rumbling threat to the Goliath reverberating throughout his chest.

The ankylosaurus and pachyrhinosaurus immediately broke away from the watering hole upon seeing the Goliath carcharodontosaurus. The Goliath snapped at a few of the herbivores as they passed, but his scorching eyes never left the Mother Gaia or her infant. The mother giraffatitan was the only herbivore remaining on the shore, standing between the Goliath and the Mother Gaia. The Goliath bared his fangs at Prometheus and looked towards the giraffatitan.

Zosimus whispered, "If these animals are like leopards, then the Goliath is going to kill either that herbivore or Prometheus. We need to head upstream, *now!*"

"Understood," Disciple said. "Take point, Zo-"

Zosimus dove blindly into the oasis as the Goliath charged. CHAPTER SEVENTEEN– CONIUNCTIO

The Panopolis oasis erupted with the cataclysmic struggle between the female giraffatitan and the Goliath carcharodontosaurus. The Goliath had its jaws around the base of the giraffatitan's neck, its clawed forearms clasped tightly to the sauropod's broad shoulders. The giraffatitan's infant brayed like a bull as it toddled back from the fray. The Mother Gaia carcharodontosaurus guarded her juvenile, the Prometheus

carcharodontosaurus, as they watched the struggling titans from across the reservoir. Zosimus Kaikara and the other men were paddling through the oasis, towards the mountain tributary.

Zosimus thrashed through the churning waves as Josef effortlessly paddled past him. The men of Stalker Force and Quad Equitum easily outpaced the Ovimbundu bounty hunter. Zosimus huffed and panted as he kicked harder, but he couldn't seem to close the distance. In a

matter of minutes the rest of the team was over fifty feet ahead of him. Foul water rushed into Zosimus's mouth as he gasped for air, fighting against the rolling waves. He choked and cried out, "*Suku-Suku*— help me!" Zosimus looked to the right of the mountain stream and saw the mother giraffatitan trotting along the shoreline with the Goliath clinging to her flank, gnawing at her thighs. Every palm tree in their path was crushed and trampled underfoot, buried beneath kicked-up clouds of white sand. The reservoir roiled turbulently as the falling trees beat against the shoreline and crashed into the water. Waves crashed over Zosimus and he thrust his arms over his head, crying out, "*Irmão! Irmão*, help me!"

The men of Stalker Force and Quad Equitum were already halfway to the mountain tributary. Josef glanced over his shoulder when he heard his partner howling for help, thrashing helplessly in the tempest. Josef quickly spun around in the water and started swimming towards Zosimus. He heard a roar from the shoreline as the Mother Gaia carcharodontosaurus suddenly attacked the infant giraffatitan, wrestling the smaller sauropod against the threshed soil. The mother giraffatitan heard the piercing shrieks of her infant and groaned in distress, turning to heed her crying calf.

The Goliath carcharodontosaurus leaned into the side of the mother giraffatitan with his jaws fastened around the back of her neck. The Goliath kicked the giraffatitan's stomach with his toe talons, penetrating the thick skin of her underbelly. Ragged lacerations from the Goliath's claws and teeth spread open across the giraffatitan's speckled body. The Goliath kept the mother giraffatitan in place as she bled to death, howling as she was forced to watch the Mother Gaia gnaw open the throat of her infant. The mother giraffatitan buckled to her knees and fell towards the oasis, her graceful neck bending and swaying beneath the approaching thunderclouds.

The falling titan's shadow spread between Zosimus and Josef. The mother giraffatitan crashed into the lagoon with a cataclysmic blast of muddy water. Tumultuous waves of silt and viscous clay threw the bounty hunters to opposite ends of the reservoir. The Goliath

carcharodontosaurus waded hip-deep into the watering hole as the gilded waters ran red with the slain giraffatitan's blood. A rogue wave splashed the Mother Gaia as she tore the infant giraffatitan's head away from its mutilated neck. The Mother Gaia growled through her bloody mouthful when she saw Josef swimming past her, towards the rest of the men climbing out of the southern end of the reservoir. Josef coughed as he dragged himself onto the shore. "*Meu irmão*—" "We won't leave him behind," Molnar said, pulling Josef to his feet.

The Mother Gaia's juvenile offspring, Prometheus, was standing in the shade of a tulip tree just a few meters away from where Zosimus had washed ashore. The bounty hunter spat silt as he dragged himself up the length of a half-submerged lala palm. He was wary of Prometheus; the carcharodontosaurus easily dwarfed Zosimus. The gangly juvenile was larger than the carnotaurus that had attacked the night before, with the nervous energy of an over-caffeinated child.

Zosimus kept his eyes on the anxious young theropod as he slowly climbed the bank. Prometheus cocked his head and took a few clumsy steps towards the bounty hunter. Zosimus grabbed a broken branch from the mud and waved it in the air for the carcharodontosaurus to see.

"See the stick?" Zosimus coughed. "*Stick*, stupid! Get the stick!"

Zosimus hurled the stick over the carcharodontosaurus's head, into the palm forest. Prometheus turned his head to watch the stick, then looked back to Zosimus. The bounty hunter was already sprinting down the shoreline, towards the mountain tributary. Prometheus looked uncertainly towards the Mother Gaia and saw the Goliath crossing the oasis towards her. The Goliath barked at the Mother Gaia, trying to draw her attention to the slain giraffatitan. The Mother Gaia crouched over the beheaded giraffatitan calf and growled defensively at the rogue male carcharodontosaurus.

The Goliath turned away, baring his fangs at Prometheus. Prometheus was awkwardly loping across the sand in pursuit of the bounty hunter. Zosimus sprinted towards the mountain stream; he was nearly a hundred meters from Josef and the others. There was a tremendous roar from his right as the Goliath thrashed across the bloody lagoon. The Mother Gaia saw the Goliath pursuing her infant and immediately rose to her feet. The Mother Gaia bellowed as she circled the reservoir towards the Goliath, trotting past the half-hidden men of Stalker Force and Quad Equitum.

Zosimus screamed involuntarily and dove away as the Goliath lunged out of the oasis, onto the shoreline. Prometheus nearly stumbled over his own over-sized feet as he staggered to a halt. The Goliath almost crushed Zosimus as he crawled over the trunks of fallen palm trees. Zosimus pounced onto a raffia palm on the eastern shore and started to climb.

Zosimus knew that the Goliath was trying to kill Prometheus; most male predators eliminated the offspring of suitable mates to bring the females to estrus. Zosimus was starting to think that the Goliath was

in a state of *musth*, like the bull elephants he had once followed with the *Onjoi* tribe. It would have explained the Goliath's hyper-territorial behavior towards the XR311's and the carnotaurus. Zosimus abandoned these thoughts when he reached the leafy top of the raffia palm and saw the Mother Gaia barreling down the shore-line, howling at the backside of the Goliath carcharodontosaurus.

The Mother Gaia rammed head-first into the Goliath's pelvis, bulldozing the male through several rows of raffia and lala palms. The splitting screams of the collapsing trees was superseded by the combined roars of the struggling carcharodontosaurus. Zosimus clung to his narrow raffia palm trunk as the juvenile carcharodontosaurus, Prometheus, jumped and nipped at his heels.

Zosimus's buried fingernails splintered apart against the rough raffia bark as he was dragged down by gravity. Zosimus screamed; his fingers were bleeding, shredded by the fibrous wood. Prometheus bit the base of the raffia palm and started tugging back and forth, testing Zosimus's grip. The bounty hunter howled and bit into the bark as his boots kicked uselessly over Prometheus's bared fangs.

Zosimus's fingers tore free and he fell with a terrified shriek.

Zosimus hit the compacted sand on his back and yelped out in pain, winded by the impact. Prometheus let go of the tree trunk and the raffia palm swung upright, cracking the Goliath on the back of its head. The Goliath turned away from the Mother Gaia and growled vehemently at the juvenile carcharodontosaurus. Prometheus squealed and turned to flee, but the Goliath bit the juvenile's tail and dragged him closer. The Mother Gaia bellowed and trampled past Zosimus as he scrambled over the fallen palm trees.

Zosimus crawled away on his hands and knees as the Mother Gaia tackled into the side of the Goliath carcharodontosaurus. The Mother Gaia pushed the Goliath down the embankment, flipping the carnivore onto his side in the water. The Goliath howled as he fought to right himself within the muddy shallows. The Mother Gaia pinned the Goliath's hip beneath her wide foot and forced him down into the suctioning clay. A bloody wave crashed over Zosimus as he climbed to his feet on the shore. Prometheus was crouched a few meters away, quivering fearfully as it watched the Goliath thrash beneath the Mother Gaia.

The waters of the oasis had become a reflection of the sky above; black charcoal with bloody veins of ember. A sense of reverence possessed Zosimus as he watched the Mother Gaia overpower the Goliath. The Mother Gaia clamped her jaw over the Goliath's snout and forced his head into the silt. The Goliath kicked wildly and roared through his flooding maw. His lengthy black tail slapped against the surface of the reservoir, throwing copper-scented mist to the dark

clouds above. The Goliath's snout bled profusely as the Mother Gaia's serrated teeth flayed the flesh from its skull. Zosimus felt his jaw swing open when he saw the Mother Gaia kick the Goliath's abdomen open, dragging his innards out into the brackish pool.

The Goliath was still shrieking through the throes of death when Zosimus turned and sprinted to the mountain tributary. The Mother Gaia finally forced the Goliath's head completely beneath the waves; the male carcharodontosaurus ceased to struggle. The Goliath's bulbous organs drifted out of its bisected gut and bobbed like obscene jellyfish in the coagulating water. Prometheus looked away from the dead Goliath and chased after Zosimus, squealing eagerly at the bounty hunter's backside.

The Mother Gaia threw her pale head back and howled triumphantly from where she stood upon the slain Goliath. The oasis had come to resemble a bleeding crater in the flesh of the earth; vultures and condors fluttered down from the sky to feast upon the bodies in the water; the Goliath; the half-submerged giraffatitan and its headless calf. Zosimus sprinted down the shore as burgundy waves stained the powder-white sand beneath his feet. The bounty hunter was closing the distance to the tributary; he was only sixty feet from Josef and the others. Molnar had his automatic SOW shotgun aimed over Zosimus's shoulder at Prometheus, still barking in pursuit.

Zosimus dove and rolled across the sand as Molnar's automatic shotgun thumped out 12-gauge slugs in rapid succession. The pounding noise of the weapon was enough to make Prometheus veer off, back across the lagoon to the Mother Gaia. The Mother Gaia carcharodontosaurus had dismounted the dead Goliath and was presently tearing ragged hunks of flesh from the giraffatitan's headless calf. Zosimus climbed back up to his knees and watched as Prometheus galloped around the Mother Gaia, snapping at the carrion birds fluttering around her kill.

Josef and Molnar pulled Zosimus up from the viscera-soused sand and dragged him over to where the others in their party were hiding. Zosimus was panting and wild-eyed with an overabundance of adrenaline; the rest of the men were utterly silent and still. Josef put a finger in front of his lips when Zosimus looked at him.

"*Meu irmão,*" Josef whispered. "We're being watched."

Josef pointed across the clearing, to the end of the reservoir where the Mother Gaia was plunging her snout into the dead giraffatitan calf.

Zosimus stared dimly as he was dragged; it looked to him as if Panopolis had been struck by a hail of mortar fire. Almost every palm tree had been uprooted and strewn across the sand in the carcharodontosaurus' warpath. Save for the gleeful chirping of Prometheus and the labored breathing of the Mother Gaia, the oasis

had suddenly reached a preternatural state of silence.

“Utahraptors,” Molnar whispered to Zosimus. “At least four.”

Josef and Molnar pulled Zosimus along as they followed the rest of Stalker Force and Quad Equitum to the abandoned workers’ camp. Pardus, Thanatos and Logos kept their rifles pointed at the overgrown bungalows as they approached. Syd Kinane and Lalo Flores were guarding Andrei Wynn and Disciple, their weapons aimed at the grumbling Mother Gaia. The carcharodontosaurus had stopped feeding, suddenly apprehensive as she watched the savanna to the west of the oasis. Zosimus followed the Mother Gaia’s line of sight and noticed a flicker of movement at the edge of the savanna; a shadow drifting through the wavering loudetia grass.

A mirage on the savanna manifested into the shape of a utahraptor. The Mother Gaia bellowed furiously as a *citrinitas* utahraptor stepped onto the tree-strewn bank of the bloody oasis. The utahraptor was cloaked in feathers that perfectly mimicked the mottled beige and gold of the grassland, with black streaks and spots running horizontally along its pelt. The utahraptor cocked its leathery grey head as it watched the enraged Mother Gaia. Prometheus took a few steps toward the utahraptor, clacking his jaws as an invitation to play. The utahraptor bared its teeth at Prometheus and growled lowly as three more *citrinitas* utahraptors coalesced through the veil of wind-swept sand.

The men were concealed from the utahraptors by the low-hanging branches of the legume trees surrounding the worker’s camp. Pardus directed Thanatos and Logos into the ivy-covered shacks while the members of Stalker Force held a perimeter around the workers’ camp. Zosimus broke free of Josef and Molnar’s grasp and took his G3 assault rifle from its sling. Zosimus could hear Logos and Thanatos tossing things around inside of the various bungalows and adobe shelters. The angry bellowing of the Mother Gaia deafened the sounds of the men. Zosimus shook the water from his G3 assault rifle as he watched the *citrinitas* utahraptors circle the Mother Gaia carcharodontosaurus.

“They’re not afraid,” Zosimus whispered. “They have no fear.”

Andrei grunted; a sardonic chuckle. “Why would they, comrade?”

The *citrinitas* utahraptors quickly trotted around the reservoir, flanking the Mother Gaia and Prometheus from four directions. Each utahraptor was nearly the size of the juvenile carcharodontosaurus; twenty feet long and eight feet tall at the hip. The utahraptors didn’t show any fear as they feigned towards the growling Mother Gaia, barking and fanning their forearm feathers in a threatening display. The carcharodontosaurus growled and backed off of the dead giraffatitan calf, wading back onto the shore. Zosimus felt his jaw

swing open again as several more *citrinitas* utahraptors suddenly emerged from the western grassland. The Mother Gaia roared defiantly as the colony of utahraptors clambered over the dead giraffatitan, claiming the kill as their own.

"This is bad," Andrei whispered. "Our situation just became dire."

"How is this worse?" Josef said. "Same shit; different dinosaurs."

"These utahraptors are from Vietnam," Lalo said. "*Citrinitas*."

"Dah," Andrei whispered. "Xipetotec might beneer, comrades."

"That means they may be carrying DM-10," Lalo said. He took a roll of bandages from his rucksack and quickly wrapped up Zosimus's shredded fingertips. Zosimus remained mute as he watched the pack of *citrinitas* utahraptors chase the pair of carcharodontosaurus away from Panopolis. An ungodly chorus of shrill utahraptor screams filled the plateau basin. The Mother Gaia took the dead giraffatitan calf's neck in her jaws and dragged it away from the reservoir, to the shade of a baobab tree in the open savanna. Prometheus stayed close to his mother's side, mewling and trembling like a newborn springbok as the utahraptors barked at his backside.

Andrei silently watched as the colony of utahraptors surrounded the body of the dead giraffatitan. The male utahraptors were distinguishable by their golden pelts, whereas the females had drab beige feathers with charcoal-black speckling. A few of the females began to construct nests in the sand around the half-submerged giraffatitan carcass. Dozens of downy utahraptor chicks wrestled and played around the fallen palm trees, squealing and chirping like baby swift birds. Andrei shuddered when he heard the male utahraptors ripping and tearing their way into the dead giraffatitan.

"These were the last utahraptors that Xipetotec was seen with," Andrei said. "We haven't detected DM-10 in arid climates, and this is pretty far from where the disease was last documented. There's also the possibility that these animals haven't carried Xipetotec's disease with them. You may be safe, bounty hunter."

"I don't feel very safe," Zosimus grunted.

"So it goes," Andrei said, shrugging. "As Captain Wise would say."

"If we see Xipetotec, we're killing him," Syd said. "No questions."

Molnar kept his shotgun aimed at the animals. "Let it go, Kinane."

There was a sudden roar from behind the wooden bungalows. Zosimus and the other men jumped to their feet, swinging their rifles around as they faced the workers' camp. Andrei dropped his journal and looked across the reservoir; a few of the utahraptors had noticed the noise and were staring directly at them. A second roar from behind the bungalows caused Andrei to spin around, jerking his M1911 pistol out of its holster. Black smoke washed over the clearing as a badly rusted troop-transport truck lurched out from behind the row of ivy-laden

shacks. Logos stuck his head out of the cab and slapped the bullet-scarred hull with his hand.

“Time to leave,” Logos shouted. “Doomsday clock’s ticking!”

The screams of the *citrinitas* utahraptors echoed from across the reservoir. Zosimus spun around with his G3 assault rifle raised and saw several of the male utahraptors sprinting full-speed around the shoreline, crossing dozens of meters within seconds. The utahraptors held their forearms against their sides as they ran, leaning forward with their tails held aloft like charging cheetahs. Zosimus fired a few rounds with his G3 rifle and took the feet out from under one of the utahraptors, causing the carnivore to tumble like a ragdoll across the sand.

Molnar and Lalo grabbed Zosimus by his arms and heaved him into the covered truck bed. Syd aimed his M60 heavy machine gun out over the tailgate and tore the air asunder with a line of screaming lead. Zosimus sat upright and looked outside as the truck bounced out of the palm forest and into the open grasslands, heading south to Mount Chrysopoeia. The pursuing *citrinitas* utahraptors easily kept pace with the decrepit troop transport. Molnar knelt beside Syd and opened fire with his automatic shotgun, keeping the predators at bay. Only a few of the utahraptors bothered to follow the truck further than the edge of the bloodied oasis. The last utahraptor to pursue the men did so only out of an instinct built by memories; of Stalker Force and their fiery weapons of war. The *nigredo* alpha male of the *citrinitas* utahraptors growled as it watched the truck roar off across the grasslands. After four years of being actively hunted by Stalker Force, the utahraptor alpha had come to recognize the faces of Andrei, Lalo, Syd and Molnar.

The horrifically scarred utahraptor had come to associate all human faces with the pain of scorching napalm. The only way the *nigredo* alpha male had ever coped with its constant physical agony had been through the ritualistic slaughter of any humans it ever came across. The utahraptor’s suffering never seemed to end, but through its anger and determination, it had led the utahraptors all the way from Vietnam to the furthest reaches of Angola. Molnar had named the animal after an Aztec deity; *the Flayed One*; the God of the DM-10 plague.

Xipetotec growled as he watched the truck, hungry for human flesh.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN– CONTEMPTUS MUNDI

Broiling thunderclouds enveloped the evening sky as Stalker Force and Quad Equitum’s commandeered truck bounced across the savanna. Logos was sweating over the steering wheel as he drove the rusted vehicle around the acacia and baobab trees scattered across the uneven terrain. Thanatos was sitting in the cab next to Logos with his

M16 angled out through the open passenger-side window. Towering giraffatitans and kikula trees blurred past like dark spires in the dusk. Thanatos kicked his boots up onto the dashboard and leaned back into the truck's tattered upholstery. The arid wind that rushed through the cab dried Logos and Thanatos's soiled black fatigues, but both men still reeked of the foul reservoir water.

"I'm feeling pretty gutted, lad," Thanatos grunted.

Logos nodded quickly. "This job has been fucking insane, man."

"There's no sense to any of this, mate," Thanatos said. He leaned away from the window as the truck rumbled past a flock of gallimimus striding along the plain. A few of the ostrich-mimics swung their serpentine necks around and squawked at Thanatos through the open window. The truck veered around the thick trunk of a baobab, and the gallimimus flock broke off in the other direction. A male giraffatitan on the other side of the baobab tree groaned and side-stepped away as the bouncing truck swerved around its legs. Thanatos scowled and craned his neck back to look up the length of the giraffatitan's striped neck.

"If me ol' mates in the SAS knew what I was up to these days,"

Thanatos said, shaking his head. "Looking for particle accelerator jiggerypokery in the heart of darkness...with dinosaurs. Fucking daft, the lot of it."

"I kinda like it, man," Logos said. He spun the steering wheel to avoid hitting an ankylosaurus that was guiding its calves through the truck's path. Logos looked to the southern horizon where the savanna came to an abrupt stop at the forested foothills of Mount Chrysopoeia. A landlocked halo of roiling fog gave the mountain the appearance of an island caught in a maelstrom. Bright red heat-lightning flashed and webbed over the shrouded hillocks, as silent and threatening as a boomslang viper.

"You're daft," Thanatos grunted. "We're in one big pile of shite."

"Same shit, different day," Logos said. "Always knee-deep in it."

"Never in dinosaur shite," Thanatos said. "Not like Cap'n Wise."

"Literally," Logos grunted. He narrowed his eyes and leaned closer to peer through the sand-scratched windshield. The evening sun no longer sieved through the thunderclouds mounting on the southern horizon, and the headlights of the truck were long dead. It was getting increasingly difficult for Logos to spot the smaller animals and obstacles hidden in the long grass. Warthogs and pachycephalosaurus families scattered from thorny brambles as the truck rumbled past, rattling on its decaying shocks.

Logos mumbled distantly as he drove. "We've got twenty-five operations under our belt, man. We'll get out of here. I just want a souvenir

- something to bring back to my kid, y'know? My son Arby's all about the dinosaurs these days. If he knew what I was up to right now, oh man...its so much better than any museum. I'd just have to keep him away from the meateaters. He'd know better than me, but shit, I might know more than him after we're done with this shit-show."

"Never knew you were a father," Thanatos said. He kept his eyes to the west, where the mountain tributary climbed up the gradual plain towards the jungle slopes further south. Thanatos hummed thoughtfully to himself when he spotted a village positioned between the mountain tributary and the mist-wreathed tree line. "Ease 'er brakes, mate."

Thanatos kept one hand on his M16 as he detached the telescopic sight from Logos's FR-F1 sniper rifle. Peering through the scope to the southern horizon, Thanatos saw a dark lagoon set beneath the village. A parallel row of adobe shelters had been built upon a well-treaded glade above the muddy bank. The conical nests and shadow-swathed bodies of maiasaura lined the opposite shore from the human settlement. A longhouse constructed of timber sat on western end of the village, with a campfire raging in front of its entrance.

"Slower, mate," Thanatos said. "Native knob-jockeys up ahead."

Thanatos watched through the scope as the campfire's light played across the dark forms of the Cuban BRDM-2's from Panopolis. Logos eased up on the gas, allowing the truck to drop into lower gears. The idle rumbling of the thunderclouds above muffled the sounds of the scrapheap truck. Thanatos kept the scope steady as he studied the Cuban soldiers that were climbing out of the armored vehicles. A group of Ovimbundu men carrying AK47's stepped out of the wooden long-house and convened with the Cubans by the campfire.

"Lucky ourlights are shot," Thanatos chuffed. "Head East, mate."

Logos turned the wheel to the left, steering the truck away from the distant village. A white latticework of lightning flickered in the dark skies above, casting a blinding reflection upon the black surface of the lagoon. Thanatos grunted irritably and lowered the scope, rubbing his eye. When he raised the scope again, he saw several headlights flash on like lantern lights on the eastern end of the village. Thanatos watched the gliding headlights skim across the horizon, circling around the mountain tributary towards the direction of the truck. Thanatos reattached the telescopic sight to Logos's FR-F1 sniper rifle and sat it between them. "Three MPLA jeeps inbound, mate. I could kick the windshield out and try to pick the buggers off, but there's no way to tell our lads in the back of the truck unless we get out. And before you ask I'm not up for climbing around to get into the bed. Not since the last time we tried that in Sudan."

Logos kept a lead foot on the gas pedal; the speedometer's needle

crawled to forty - fifty- fifty-five miles per hour. The truck's transmission lurched arduously into higher gears. Thanatos eased open the passenger door with his boot, grabbed the roof hand-hold, and craned his body out of the cab. Scathing dust billowed up from the truck's front tires and clouded over the mercenary's body. The wind-swept sand engulfed the pursuing jeeps; only their yellow headlights and roof-mounted light-bars were visible in the haze. Thanatos held his M16 in his left hand and propped the stock against his shoulder. The jeeps were ten meters behind the truck and rapidly gaining ground on them. Thunderclouds erupted with the fanfare of wardrums as the first shots rang out from the pursuing MPLA. Muzzle-flares flashed through the swirling dust devils and bullets chipped at the passenger door behind Thanatos's back.

Thanatos held down the trigger of his M16 and drew a line of fire just under the light-bars of the jeeps. Thanatos heard the roar of Syd Kinane's M60 from the truck's canvas-covered bed; bullets sparked across the hoods of the jeeps, illuminating their dark forms. The jeep furthest to the left swerved away from the others, peeling off into a wild arc across the savanna. Logos was listening to the twin roars of Syd's M60 and the truck's obsolete engine as he drove. The rustedbeast of burden wasn't meant for a high speed chase; Logos knew the jeeps would outrun them in seconds.

"If they get around us its fucking game over, man," Logos said. Thanatos ignored him; he aimed his M16 at the fishtailing jeep and squeezed off a few rounds, placing shots into the heads of each Ovimbundu passenger. Thanatos sat back inside of the truck's cab and planted his boots against the dashboard. He quickly ejected his spent magazine as the two remaining jeeps roared up along both sides of the truck. Thanatos snapped a new magazine into his M16 and opened fire through the open doorway as one of the jeeps came parallel with his side of the truck cab. Stray bullets pummeled the truck's chassis as the MPLA returned fire from their jeep.

Logos clutched the steering wheel in one hand and took his Uzi sub-machine gun from its shoulder sling. He glanced in the driver-side mirror and saw the second jeep rapidly approaching. Muzzle flares from the rebels' AK47's flashed in the reflection and the mirror exploded. A shower of broken glass and shrapnel sprayed across Logos's face, lacerating his eyes and cheeks. Logos shrieked in pain and let go of the steering wheel, pawing at the shards of glass embedded in his masticated eyes.

The truck swung violently to the left and crashed into the side of an MPLA jeep. Thanatos and Logos cried out as they were thrown back in their seats by the impact. The truck shuddered and bounced as it ground the jeep against the floor of the savanna. Thanatos could hear

the screams of the MPLA rebels as they were mangled and dismembered in their crumpling cage of glass and steel. The men in the back of the truck howled and yelled as they ricocheted and rolled around in the rocking bed.

The truck dropped hood-first into a ditch and crashed down onto its front axle. Thanatos threw his hands over his face as the cab crumpled inward against the narrow walls of the gully. The airbags didn't deploy; Logos and Thanatos slammed against the dashboard and fell back against their seats. Their faces and forearms were covered in cuts, bruises, and thorns of half-buried glass. Logos doubled over against the driver-side door and vomited out the window. The remaining MPLA jeep circled the ditch, revving its engine as the MPLA passengers shouted and fired their AK47's at the truck.

"Logos," Thanatos wheezed. "Mate –"

Bullets pounded through the roof of the cab; perforations opened over Thanatos's head and he tumbled to the floor. Thanatos grabbed his M16 and aimed it over Logos's lacerated scalp as the jeep growled past like a stalking leopard. Thanatos held his breath and listened.

Everybody in the back of the truck was silent; Thanatos assumed they were all either unconscious or dead. He could hear the jeep's tires chewing gravel as it circled around the bed of the truck, towards the passenger side of the cab. Thanatos turned and aimed his M16 through the warped frame of the passenger window. Thanatos's mind was cloudy, but he clearly remembered seeing four rebels inside of the remaining MPLA jeep.

"I'll nip these cunts," Thanatos hissed. "Just hold tight, Logos."

The jeep inched past the window and Thanatos opened fire.

The cacophonous report of Thanatos's M16 in the cab deafened the footsteps of two MPLA rebels as they slid down into the ditch. Logos moaned weakly as the Ovimbundu men dragged him out through the shattered driver-side window. While Thanatos was firing his M16 at the enemy jeep, the two MPLA rebels heaved Logos to the ground and unsheathed their kukri machetes.

Thanatos put a round into the head of each of the two MPLA rebels remaining in the jeep. He watched as the vehicle slowed to a crawl and drifted off, the dead driver sagging in the front seat. Thanatos lowered the rifle and heard a blood-curdling scream from over his shoulder. He spun around and saw an MPLA rebel dragging Logos out of the ditch by his mangled arms. The second Ovimbundu man lopped a kukri machete through Logos's face, cleaving his forehead open. Thanatos screamed Logos's name and dropped his rifle, scrambling across the glass-covered seat. The Ovimbundu men looked up in surprise when they heard Thanatos barking obscenities from the truck cab. Thanatos dove out with his thick arms spread, tackling both of

the rebels against the bottom of the ditch. Thanatos jerked the machetes away from the rebels and swung mindlessly, slashing the blades through their upraised hands and forearms. All three of the men were howling as the machetes plunged in and out of ribcages, throats and abdomens.

"Goddamned savages," Thanatos bellowed. "You stupid cunts!" Thanatos buried the kukris down to their hilts in eachman's skull and climbed out of the ditch, slippery with fresh blood. He peered over the edge of the gully and saw the sole remaining MPLA jeep slowly rolling towards an ankylosaurus grazing only ten yards away. Thanatos jumped to his feet and started stumbling after the vehicle; it was the team's only chance at escape. If he didn't claim the jeep, they would be forced to walk for at least another full day, if not more. Thanatos held his hands out like a pleading beggar as he staggered towards the ankylosaurus.

"C'mon, old boy," Thanatos huffed, wincing in pain. "Don't—" The ankylosaurus brayed defensively and swung its tail through the side of the jeep. The carcasses onboard were thrown into the air as the vehicle crumpled around the herbivore's bony club. The ankylosaurus stomped around the clearing, fighting to free its bludgeon from the wrecked vehicle. Thanatos fell to his knees, shaking his head in exasperation. The ankylosaurus groaned irritably as it repeatedly slammed the jeep against the earth. Thanatos didn't hear the footsteps approaching his backside.

"Stand up, Thanatos," Pardus grunted. "We have work to do."

"Aye, sir," Thanatos coughed. "I'm just needin' a kip."

Thanatos felt a pair of large hands clasp his shoulders, and he was hoisted off of the ground. Syd Kinane raised Thanatos to his feet and spun him around. Thanatos blinked at the men surrounding him; Pardus, Syd and Josef Gustavo. Their uniforms were torn and their exposed skin was covered in splotchy bruises and bloody knots. Otherwise, they appeared to be unharmed by the crash.

Thanatos looked past them and saw Zosimus Kaikara and James Molnar carrying Andrei Wynn out of the truck bed. The tailgate of the truck jutted out of the ditch as if the vehicle had been left half-buried in the savanna. Lalo Flores was administering first aid to Disciple underneath the rear axle; Logos's dead body was already wrapped in a leather body bag beside them.

"Poor bloke," Thanatos wheezed. "Forgive me, Pardus. Logos"

"You're fine," Pardus said. The Vietnamese mercenary narrowed his eyes at the only other surviving squad-mate in Quad Equitum. Pardus put a hand on Thanatos's shoulder. "You did good. It's a shame we lost Logos. His family won't ever know what happened to him. They'll only know that he died heroically in the face of savages; scared

animals trying to strike fear in our hearts.”

“I wasn’t scared,” Thanatos said. “I’d kill the cunts again.”

“We will,” Pardus grunted. “We’re ending this tonight.”

Thanatos coughed. “You know – I never knew – ”

Pardus raised a hand to silence Thanatos. “The MPLA rebels have broken the social contract. The Cubans knew we were here, and they sent their indigenous pawns after us. The blood of Logos is on the hands of the Cuban soldiers and every goddamned communist living in that village. Once we set up camp, the four of us are going to make sure those savages never shed our blood again. I’ve already come to this agreement with Mr. Gustavo and Mr. Kinane.”

Thanatos looked at Syd and Josef. “Why are you lads helping?”

“Future membership,” Syd said. “I’m joining Quad Equitum.”

Pardus said, “Corporal Kinane is tired of hunting dinosaurs.”

Josef shrugged uncomfortably as he held his rifle. He looked across the plain at the truck, where Zosimus was slapping Andrei awake.

Josef said, “I spent a decade fighting these people with *meu irmão*. We’re so close to being off of this continent, I can almost taste the European champagne. I’m not trying to risk my partner getting killed by these old *monstros*, our bastard brothers in this wretched whore of a motherland.” “This will be Josef’s first mission in Quad Equitum,” Pardus said. “*Sim*,” Josef nodded, looking away. “My first and last.”

“Come on, Thanatos,” Pardus said. He slapped his squad-mate on the shoulder as he walked with Syd and Josef back to the rest of the group. He called over his shoulder, “The night is young, my friend. We’ll teach those rebels what it means to know fear.”

Thanatos shuffled after them, plucking glass shards from his arms.

“I never-never knew,” Thanatos coughed. “-Logos was a father.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN– DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

Logos’s body bag was dragged away by hyenas as Stalker Force and Quad Equitum crossed the starlit savanna. Zosimus Kaikara and Josef Gustavo led the men along the tree-line of the jungle until they found a suitable shelter for the night; a barren den in the face of a kopje, just large enough for four men to sleep inside of. Zosimus and Josef had to hack their way through brambles of grey thorn brush to reach the entrance of the temporary shelter.

Once the camp-site was set up, Lalo tended to the wounds that the men had sustained in the truck crash before settling in for the night. Zosimus, Lalo, Molnar, and Andrei were the first to sleep in the kopje’s cramped cave. Disciple, Pardus, Thanatos, Josef and Syd were assigned to take first watch. The mosaic of stars above was quickly washed away by the rolling tide of thunderclouds. A few raindrops pattered upon the kopje’s bald head, but the storm had yet to release

its torrential downpour on the parched grasslands.

Disciple sat with his back to the mouth of the kopje, warming his bare feet against the camp fire's glowing coals. Pardus, Thanatos, Josef and Syd were maintaining a perimeter outside of the wiry thorn brush woven around the campsite. Disciple had his M16 laying across his lap with the safety switched on. The CIA agent trusted Pardus and the others with protecting the campsite. Disciple knew that even if he needed to use the rifle, he would be better off sounding the alarm for the men inside of the den than fighting by himself.

Disciple sighed wearily and rubbed his tired eyes. Every inch of his body ached from the countless bruises and abrasions he had sustained from the two crashes he had endured; the XR311 and the truck.

Despite serving with the Psychological Operations division during the Vietnam War, Disciple had never seen combat first-hand. This was his first mission serving as a 'handler' on behalf of the CIA, overseeing an active combat operation.

The only dead bodies that Disciple had ever seen before coming to Angola had been the body-bagged remains of Americans being sent home from various bases in Southern Vietnam, during the Tet Offensive. He couldn't exorcise the images of violence and bloodshed from the past three days that ran rampant through his concussed head. As much as Disciple wanted to remember the faces of his most recent ex-wife and their children, he couldn't conjure their visages forth through the fresh corpses rapidly piling in his subconscious. Disciple heard the rasp of cloth against rock as one of the sleeping men stirred within the cave. Disciple glanced over his shoulder and saw the Russian scientist of Stalker Force, Andrei Wynn, clambering out of the kopje den. Andrei rubbed the sleep-sand from his eyes and sat down heavily beside Disciple. Embers popped within the fire pit, sending sparks heavenward on sheets of silken white smoke. Andrei shuddered involuntarily when he remembered the sounds of Willard's body cooking on the crematory pyre.

Disciple cleared his throat. "Can't sleep, Doctor Wynn?"

"Dah," Andrei said. "Nightmares of Xipetotecagain."

"Understandable," Disciple said. "I'm happy you're up."

"I'm not," Andrei grunted. "Happy, that is. What do you want?"

Disciple placed his hands on the trigger guard and barrel of his M16. He straightened up, trying to peer over the surrounding clumps of thorn brush. When Disciple didn't see the heads of the other men keeping watch, he slouched back into his original position and sighed doggedly. "We're up shit's creek, Doctor Wynn," Disciple said. "I want to know everything about the original collider you built for the Soviet Union, back in Vietnam. I know you designed it with some kind of built-in deadman's switch. I wanna know why you built the collider

with this hidden feature, to create these rifts in space-time. What purpose would that have served your superiors in Russia? Were you trying to sabotage their plans?" Andrei stared into the roiling fire as the flames danced and hissed. "You're blind," Andrei softly muttered. "As blind as Jericho." Disciple clicked off the safety of his M16. "Help me see clearly." "The collider wasn't originally meant for the Soviet Union," Andrei said. He adjusted his glasses; the shimmering coals from the campfire reflected off of the fractured lenses. "I designed the collider for a group known as Ordo Ouroboros - a society so old that it predates the creation of my own mother country. My father was the highest ranking member within Ordo Ouroboros; he paid for me to go to the most prestigious universities that Germany had to offer. Once East Germany went to the Soviet Union, the KGB tracked me down. They wanted my life's work."

"Ordo Ouroboros," Disciple repeated. "You're full of shit, Wynn." Andrei shrugged affably. "I'm full of unfortunate truths, comrade." "You're really testing my patience," Disciple grunted. "Keep in mind that when we get out of Angola, you're going from Stalker Force to Guantanamo Bay, where you belong. My superiors in the Central Intelligence Agency have been waiting for years to put your ass on the fire. I'm trying to get the intel-gathering out of the way now, while we're together, before it has to get ugly. I remember hearing suggestions of waterboarding and teeth-pulling getting tossed around back at Langley Falls." "Empty promises," Andrei chuckled. "Unless we survive." "Just answered the damned question, Wynn," Disciple snapped. "Why did you purposefully sabotage the Soviet Union's particle accelerator in Vietnam? You're the sole man responsible for all of this - the dinosaurs here in Angola, the collider in Vietnam, and every death by DM-10 in between. You're the only one to blame for the deaths of Captain Wise, Jericho's nephew, plus Logos and Eros - those two have real names and families, by the way. I want to know why you originally designed the colliders with this ulterior function, to create rifts in space-time."

"It wasn't my choice," Andrei said. "Ask Ordo Ouroboros."

"They're not even *real*," Disciple grumbled, gripping his rifle. "You don't think I've heard of these stupid fucking conspiracy theories? Secret societies; ancient esoteric orders; a hidden cabal controlling politicians and world powers from the shadows. You're not going to bullshit your way out of this with urban legends, *Andrei*. I know you're smart - you're a fucking physicist, a paleo-expert, a certified *genius* - but you're not going to treat me like I'm as gullible as some stoned beatnik like Molnar. If you're not going to tell me the truth, I'll let the men down at Guantanamo Bay *beat* it out of ya."

Andrei laughed. "You still think we'll get off this savanna *alive*."

Disciple kicked a branch into the fire with a disgusted grunt. He was thinking of a comeback when he heard a distant scream from across the savanna. Andrei immediately jumped to his feet upon hearing the far-off wail. He recognized the screech as the vocalization of a utahraptor; the same sound that ravenously tore through his dreams every night. Andrei unholstered his M1911 pistol and held it aloft in one hand as he looked back and forth, over the rows of biting thorn brush.

“Where are the others,” Andrei said. “Where’s Kinane?”

Disciple blinked. “You don’t see them?”

“*Cyka blyat*,” Andrei spat, pacing around the fire. He spun around and glowered over the CIA agent. “Xipetotec’s utahraptors are in this region, you stupid whore-spawn. There’s no excuse for Syd and Nguyen to be out of your sight. Where the hell are they, Disciple? Are you so blind you can’t see that they’re *missing*?! Xipetotec could be out there, and we have four men that have vanished!”

Andrei turned and ran past the fire, through the thorn brush to the open grassland beyond. Disciple stood and watched as Andrei wheeled around the parched grass across the clearing, calling out for Syd and Pardus. Andrei cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, “Nguyen! Kinane! Return to the camp! I repeat, come back to the campsite!”

Disciple heard boots shuffling behind him and turned to see Molnar.

“Kinane’s missing?” Molnar yawned. “Looking for Xipetotec?”

“Apparently so,” Disciple said. “The others are gone, too.”

“Hell’s bells, you’re useless,” Molnar grunted. “Let’s go get ‘em.”

The campfire writhed and cackled, dancing before Disciple’s eyes.

Zosimus was sweating and mumbling inside of the kopje den as vivid dreams possessed his subconscious. His dreaming mind was drifting like a cloud through fractals of stars, a distant spectator above a moonlit savanna. The unbreakable current of the dream dragged Zosimus’s bodiless consciousness towards a lone baobab tree in the center of the moonlit grassland. A colony of *chacma* baboons were whimpering and squealing to one another from beneath the baobab as they crowded around the body of a dead elephant.

Zosimus floated around the clearing as an apparition, unnoticed by the emaciated baboons surrounding the elephant carcass. He recognized the signs of starvation in the sunken eyes of the primates, their swollen bellies distending from skeletal frames. One of the starving female baboons was hunched over her dead offspring, gnawing at its corpse. The other baboons kept their distance from the cannibalistic mother. Zosimus could see that they were afraid of the mother baboon, shrinking away from the horrors she had succumbed

to during the perilous drought.

Zosimus drifted past the ravenous mother baboon, carried by his dream to the dead elephant beneath the baobab tree. The patriarch of the *chacma* baboons was attempting to carve open the gut of the pachyderm with a sharp rock the shape of a kukri machete. Zosimus could sense the desperation of the old male as it weakly dragged the crenulated flint across the elephant's wrinkled hide. Zosimus instinctively reached for the baboon's crude blade, to help the ape with the arduous task.

A bolt of lightning speared down from the celestial cosmos above and struck the elephant carcass, igniting the body with an electrical scream. The baboon patriarch leapt back as sparks showered from the immolated pachyderm. The other *chacma* baboons hooted and screeched in alarm, dancing on their feet around the sudden blaze. Zosimus ignored the din of the *chacma* colony as he watched the elephant transmute to ash. The soot fell away from the form of the elephant, revealing a headless Ovimbundu woman lying naked and mutilated in the lecherous flames.

"Nyoho," Zosimus whispered fitfully in his sleep. "Mother-"

The patriarch of the *chacma* baboons started to chatter excitedly as he hobbled around the smoldering remains of Zosimus's mother. The baboon's eyes shone with the vigor of the fire as he wrenched a branch from the baobab tree. The patriarch baboon squealed and hopped around the flames, using his make-shift spear to jab at the beheaded corpse within. Zosimus watched with morbid fascination, no longer burdened by a conscious ego to intercept the immediate perceptions of his dreaming mind.

The patriarch baboon hooted victoriously, raising a speared length of smoking human intestines high above its head. The rest of the *chacma* baboons turned rabid with their hunger, leaping upon the patriarch to steal the seared organ meat. Zosimus watched with mounting horror as the baboons tore apart their patriarch in a mindless frenzy. The curling innards were dropped and lost to the fire, unnoticed by the participants of the melee. One of the male *chacma* baboons took the branch from the patriarch and jabbed it at the roasting Ovimbundu woman. Zosimus whimpered meekly in his sleep as he listened to the other baboons clash and shriek.

The cannibalistic mother baboon abandoned her partially-eaten child and screamed, flailing towards the branch-wielding male. The male

baboon cried out in fear and swung his emblazoned bludgeon into the mother's face. The mother baboon's hair instantly ignited and she became engulfed in flame. Zosimus was trapped in his nightmare, forced to watch as the mother baboon screamed and writhed across the burning grassland.

"No," Zosimus cried out in his sleep. "Stop!"

The *chacma* baboons in Zosimus's dream were incapable of hearing his words. The entire colony was fighting over the immolated body of the headless Ovimbundu woman. The mothers and infants were beaten to death by the males, who in turn attacked each other out of rage and in retaliation. The *chacma* baboons were lost to their state of fear and bloodlust. Tendrils of fire spread from the neck of Zosimus's mother, trailing smoke as they slithered across the savanna in a burningspider's web.

"Stop," Zosimus whimpered, hyperventilating. "*Suku, please-*"

Zosimus's warnings were wasted on the *chacma* baboons. The savanna was filled with the screams of the colony as the primates tore each others' flesh from bone. The fire climbed up the baobab tree, charring the trunk to a shining black monolith wreathed in smoke. The wide canopy erupted in a blazing mushroom cloud and burning leaves showered over the savanna. Zosimus continued to whimper the word 'Suku' in his sleep as the landscape of his dream was consumed by the righteous fire.

The *chacma* baboon colony's shrieks of fear and anger had given way to the tormented screams of the dead and dying. Zosimus chanted 'Nyoho' in a breathless whisper as he watched the baboons crawl over each other in an attempt to escape the infernal rising tide. A final image of the savanna ablaze sent the bounty hunter rocketing back to conscious reality with a horrified gasp. The first thing Zosimus saw upon waking up was Molnar's face looking back at him from the mouth of the kopje den.

"Come on, bounty hunter," Molnar said. "Your partner is missing."

Zosimus didn't bother to ask any questions; he quickly reclaimed his G3 rifle from the sandy floor of the cave and climbed out on shaking legs. Lalo, Disciple, and Andrei were waiting outside with their weapons drawn. A cold chill settled upon Zosimus's body as he drowsily stumbled over to join the others. He didn't know where his *irmão* had gone, but he had a painful intuition based on his prior

experiences with Josef in the Portuguese *Caçadores Especiais*.

Zosimus could still hear the screams of the burning baboons.

CHAPTER TWENTY– SOLVE ET COAGULA

Within the jungle behind the MPLA village, Pardus and his posse were sharpening their machetes and daggers in the dark. Josef was dimly aware of blades being displayed in the scant moonlight, twisting through the open air as their cutting edges were examined. There was a cold tension between the four shadows swathed in palm fronds. The song of cicada surrounded them, concealing the hissing of their whetstones. Lightning threaded through the storm clouds overhead; the rain had yet to fall upon the parched savanna.

Pardus stared up at the moon as his finger played with the Ordo Ouroboros pendant tied to his ka-bar's hilt. Josef held his own traditional Portuguese bush knife in a trembling fist. Pardus caught Josef's gaze and grinned, revealing a smile of stained ivory that was framed by jagged palm fronds. He whispered, "You're with me, bounty hunter. Kinane – circle around the huts with Thanatos, on the lagoon side. Thanatos - save your ordinance for the long-house at the west end of the village."

"Ordinance?" Josef repeated. "What ordinance, *irmão*?" "C4," Thanatos whispered, opening his rucksack. White plastic bricks wrapped inelectrical tape were nestled inside. "If the cunts inside this village get dodgy, I'll flip a switch and turn their shithouses into tinderboxes."

Josef stared as Thanatos stashed away the C4. "Is that necessary?" "Absolutely," Pardus said. "Trust me, *irmão*."

"I trust you," Josef exhaled. He held his knife aloft and rose beside Pardus. "Let's get this over with, *irmão*. Clear out the huts and leave no rebel or Cuban alive, right?"

"Affirmative," Pardus said. He motioned to Thanatos and Syd, directing them north, behind the row of huts that were facing away from the lagoon. Syd and Thanatos held their rifles up and dashed out of the forest, blurring through the long grass across the clearing. Pardus turned to Josef and whispered, "Follow my lead. We'll make this quick."

Pardus crawled out of the foliage on his fingertips and toes, crawling as swiftly as a leopard through the waist-high loudetia grass. Josef crouched and followed Pardus through the brush, his heart clotting in his throat. Thunder clapped and lightning streaked through the obsidian clouds overhead. Josef and Pardus dropped into prone positions as the savanna was briefly lit by the strobing heavens. A bolt

of lightning struck a baobab across the plains, igniting the monolith with a caterwauling scream. Josef stopped and stared, transfixed by the flames rising like diaphanous tendrils from the baobab's skeletal canopy.

"Ignore mother nature," Pardus whispered. "Don't heed her call."

Josef nodded, pretending he understood what the Vietnamese mercenary was talking about. The adrenaline enervating Josef's body made him feel as though he were living through a lucid dream. He followed after Pardus as absent-mindedly as a sheep tailing its shepherd to the eastern end of the village, where the jeeps had once been parked. The Cuban BRDM2's were nowhere to be seen on the western end of the village; it wasn't clear if they would be returning at all.

Josef trailed after Pardus to a fallen kikula tree on the eastern end of the village. Pardus peered over the seventy-foot log and studied the village through his binoculars. The settlement was silent; the fire at the entrance to the long-house had been doused hours ago. Only two men were on guard duty, standing in the pathway that divided the parallel row of huts. The adobe shelter that was closest to Pardus and Josef was being protected by a single Ovimbundu man dressed in ratty beige fatigues, wielding a rusted shotgun. The other guard had an AK-47 but he was pacing down the dirt path away from the first guard, deeper into the village.

Pardus put the binoculars away and withdrew his ka-bar knife. He put a hand on Josef's shoulder and motioned with the ka-bar to the lone rebel wandering down the path, towards the long-house. Pardus stepped away from Josef and slipped through the long grass towards the rebel guarding the first hut.

Josef crawled through the alley of grass that separated the village from the jungle, heading west to cut off the guard on his route to the longhouse. Josef kept glancing at the baobab burning on the horizon, a distant effigy ablaze like an eye shining in the dark. Josef heard shuffling footsteps to his right; the guard was humming a listless tune. Josef looked in his periphery and caught a glimpse of the Ovimbundu man pacing down the sandy path.

Josef glanced over his shoulder and saw Pardus silently dragging the other guard into the jungle. Pardus's ka-bar was buried to its hilt in the dead guard's ribcage. Pardus tugged the dagger free and dropped the body onto a bed of ferns. The burning baobab reflected crimson light in Pardus's sunken eye sockets. Pardus noticed Josef watching him, so he waved him on with the bloody knife.

Josef ducked between a pair of adobe shelters and peered up and down the row of huts. After seeing that no other guards were present, Josef quickly moved towards the lone man wandering down the path.

Josef felt his heart hammer harder with each step closer to the humming guard's backside. Once he was within a meter of the rebel, Josef stood up and wrapped his arm around the man's neck. Josef raked his serrated knife through the rebel's windpipe before he could even stop humming. Josef grimaced in disgust as blood washed over his forearm; he could feel the rebel's opened arteries pumping against his bare skin.

"*Esuvi-*"

Josef dropped the dead rebel and spun around with his dagger raised. An adolescent Ovimbundu boy stared back at Josef in shock as the carcass hit the dirt between them. The child rebel soldier raised his hands in compliance and backed away, repeating the *Umbundu* word *Esuvi*— *soul taker*— in a terrified whimper. A black blur shot across the pathway and tackled the child soldier between a pair of huts, into the grass beyond.

Josef heard a grunt of effort - a sudden *snap* - and the choking of the child soldier ceased. Pardus rose above the grass, painted in moonlit blood like a glowing ruby idol. His dilated pupils shimmered with the reflection of the burning baobab as the storm applauded overhead. Pardus motioned for Josef to follow, and they walked to the adobe shelter that the first man had been guarding, on the eastern end of the village.

Josef peered into the shadows within the hut and saw three Ovimbundu men sleeping on straw mats atop a packed-dirt floor. A few rusty AK47's were angled against the walls, along with rucksacks and hand-woven baskets of manioc. Pardus brushed past Josef and knelt over one of the men with his dripping-wet ka-bar in hand. Pardus reached down and clasped his hand over the rebel's mouth. The rebel's eyes blinked open and he uttered a muffled grunt of confusion.

Pardus drove the ka-bar down to its hilt in the rebel's eye socket. The Ordo Ouroboros talisman twinkled from where it rested atop the dead man's remaining eye. The *snap* of steel breaking bone triggered Josef like a Pavlovian whistle; it immediately brought his mind back to his decade of service in the *Cacadores Especias* with Zosimus. He found himself possessed by terrible instincts that he had once hoped to leave behind, abandoned when he first left Angola and the military of his ancestral people.

Josef raised his dagger and lunged onto the nearest sleeping rebel, clamping the man's mouth shut. Josef dragged his blade through the man's throat; saliva and blood bubbled through his fingers. The rebel's last words were smothered beneath the clammy palm of Josef's hand. The bounty hunter shuddered as he peeled his fingers from the cadaver's lips, flicking his wrist to toss the sticky dew of the rebel's

dying breath off of his skin.

Pardus crouched over the last rebel still alive in the hut. The Ovimbundu man was sleeping on his stomach, snoring softly as the curved end of Pardus's ka-bar hovered over the back of his head. Pardus plunged the blade into the base of the rebel's skull, penetrating his *foramen magnum* with a wet, cartilaginous *crunch*. The rebel's brain stem was severed from his spinal cord and his limbs started to flounder violently against the dirt floor. Josef moaned involuntarily at the sight of the flailing cadaver and shut his eyes. He turned away as Pardus held the body still.

The interior of the hut became silent.

"Onto the next one," Pardus whispered. "Happy hunting, *irmão*."

After placing C4 onto the huts that were facing away from the lagoon, Syd and Thanatos circled the village west to the wooden longhouse. Thanatos was searching through crates that had been stacked behind the timber long-house as Syd watched the lagoon for movement. A flash of white lightning illuminated the bodies of the maiasaura sleeping on the opposite shore, curled around their muddy nests. A few of the hadrosaurids groaned and stirred as thunder quaked through the roiling clouds above. Syd was looking past the maiasaura, towards a kopje further downstream from the mountain tributary that led to Panopolis.

C *itrinitas* utahraptors were watching them from upon the kopje. Syd counted ten of the *citrinitas* utahraptors before they trotted down the kopje, into the long grass. His eyes followed the black lines being drawn through the savanna by the utahraptors as the animals approached the lagoon. Syd sheathed his machete and withdrew his M60, taking aim at the dark bodies shifting through the loudetia. Thanatos wasn't paying any attention to Syd; he was simply feeling thankful for the C4. In the instance of a firefight, Thanatos wouldn't think twice about reducing the entire village to cinders. He had done so before innumerable times during his service with the British SAS, as well as with Quad Equitum. It was his favorite trick in the art of modern warfare – intimidation by overwhelming firepower. With enough explosive ordinance, any fighting force could be tricked into thinking they were under siege by an entire armed battalion. Thanatos carefully eased open one of the crates behind the longhouse with his machete, lifting the lid with one hand. He dug through the contents inside and frowned, befuddled. The entire crate was filled with syringes that were wrapped in plastic packaging, with labels in Spanish. He wasn't sure what the syringes were for, nor did he care. Thanatos opened another crate and pawed through the packing straw until his fingers met something cold and rough. Thanatos looked

inside of the crate and gasped inaudibly; a lump of gold glittered in his trembling fist.

"There's gold, Kinane," Thanatos whispered. "Come look, mate."

Syd saw the gold shining in Thanatos's hands and immediately lost interest in the utahraptors. He assumed they were coming to attack the maiasaura; the *citrinitas* utahraptors rarely wasted their time hunting individual humans whenever big game was present. Syd joined Thanatos beside the crate and filled his fatigue pockets with pounds of the roughhewn rock. Thanatos opened another shipping crate and whistled softly, pulling out a nugget the size of his own head. Thanatos immediately dumped his C-rations into the crate of syringes to make room for the twenty-pound stone.

"I'll give it to Logos's boy," Thanatos whispered. "The full monty." Syddidn't speak; he was watching the lagoon again. The paths that the utahraptors had made through the grass had been erased by the wind. He didn't see any of their glowing eyes dotting the grassland beyond the maiasaura on the opposing shore. Thunder shook the acacia and baobab trees dotting the savanna. Syd chewed on his handlebar moustache as his pupils grazed the bank of the lagoon. A pair of dimly lit amber eyes flashed open within the grass below the village, only thirty meters away. Syd raised his M60 as a lone emerald-feathered utahraptor stepped out into the open.

It was the only utahraptor that Syd had seen in Angola without the tawny, black-striped coats of the *citrinitas* utahraptors. Syd immediately recognized the creature as a *nigredo* utahraptor; one of the original specimens that had escaped from the valley in Vietnam. Syd's entire body trembled violently as his eyes fell upon the utahraptor's grievously scarred and deformed head. Only one utahraptor had ever worn the wounds of napalm and survived; the same animal that had been the first carrier of the DM-10 plague. The utahraptor's face and neck were covered in mottled red flesh that bore charred-black scar tissue. Its forearms were missing some primary feathers, giving the creature the appearance of having mange. Syd had spent the past four years tracking down the plague-carrying utahraptor with Stalker Force. He had stared the beast down once before with James Molnar while they were ordering a napalm strike upon the alpha male utahraptor and its kin.

Syd knew that the utahraptor, Xipetotec, would recognize him.

"Thanatos-"

Syd looked over his shoulder; Thanatos was gone.

Syd looked back to the shore and saw nothing but the sleeping maiasaura and their conical nests. Syd struggled to hold his M60 steady as he staggered towards the back of the timber long-house. The flaming baobab in the distance cracked and screeched as its burning

branches broke free, pounding the earth like the fists of giants. Syd scoured around the crates looking for Thanatos, but he only found the triggering mechanism for the C4, lying in the grass. Syd readied his M60 as he looked across the plain, trying to spot Xipetotec and the *citrinitas* utahraptors.

Syd whispered, "Where the hell are ya, Thanatos?"

Thanatos was only a dozen meters away from Syd, half-hidden in the brush as Xipetotec's crooked fangs buried into his windpipe. Thanatos screamed mutely and flailed as Xipetotec panted through blackened teeth. The utahraptor hooked its cracked foreclaws through Thanatos's ribs and pulled, splitting the sides of his torso open.

Thanatos howled without a sound as his lungs slipped out of his opened ribcage, spilling into the sand. Xipetotec buried a sickle-shaped toe talon into Thanatos's pelvis and ripped the lower half of his body away. Xipetotec had learned to associate all humans with the burning agony of napalm, and ending their lives was the only way for the utahraptor to cope with the incessant rage born from its constant pain.

The burning baobab roared, consuming Thanatos's silent screams.

Josef stepped out of his fifth targeted hut and leaned against the clay wall, swallowing back stomach acid. Pardus slapped Josef on the shoulder as he stepped out of the adjacent hut, his raised ka-bar dripping blood upon the pendant tied to its hilt. Pardus glanced into the next hut and quickly ducked inside. Josef had slain seven adult men and four teenage rebels in the past thirty minutes. He didn't know how many men Pardus had slain, or whether he had been forced to kill as many child soldiers. Josef hiccupped and spat bile into the sand. The blazing baobab's crackling voice whispered wordlessly to Josef as he entered the next clay shelter down the line.

Josef repeated his ritual with the mechanical and apathetic efficiency of an assembly line worker. After killing eleven rebel soldiers in a matter of minutes, the process of bloodletting had lost its weight. Josef toiled without thinking, actively burying his immediate actions deep within his own subconscious. Josef believed he could forget about the night of sacrifice once he retired. The European wine would pour as thick as the rebels' arterial blood to wash away his memories of Angola.

Thanatos and Pardus had promised Josef gold; they had claimed to have pilfered millions from African and Middle Eastern war zones. The fantasy of an early retirement in a civilized society was impossible for Josef to visualize while crouched upon the only rebel sleeping in the hut. Josef's face was stoic and streaked with finger-painted blood

as he palmed the man's mouth shut. He repeated his ritual without blinking as the rebel kicked beneath him.

Josef buried his dagger into the rebel's chest and felt it slide cleanly into the heart. The dying man grasped at Josef's face and neck, painting more bloody spots and stripes on his pale skin. Josef waited until the man's final heart-beat pushed the blade black, signifying the end of the ritual. Josef sighed through his teeth as he withdrew the dagger from the deadbody's sternum.

Josef went still when he noticed gold twinkling within the shadows. An icy shawl fell over Josef's body as he stared at the golden bracelet glittering on the wrist of an Ovimbundu woman sleeping on the other side of the room. Josef was amazed he hadn't seen her; she was buried beneath a pile of springbok hides with an infant girl swaddled in her arms. A cloth baboon-doll was clutched in the hands of the woman's daughter; the girl couldn't have been more than five or six years old. Josef could hear the burning baobab outside of the hut, whispering threats with a voice made of fire as the woman and child softly snored.

Josef began to tremble as he listened to the blood pumping from the opened heart of the dead rebel beneath him. Josef's low respirations transitioned into breathless hyper-ventilations as he rose from the dead man, back-pedaling out of the hut. Josef whispered, "*Not again - please, god not again*"

Josef turned on his heels and moved with a sudden urgency to the next shelter. When he looked inside he was paralyzed with shock; an Ovimbundu man was snoring on a straw mat with a woman and two toddlers between them. The entire family was sleeping peacefully with an antelope skin thrown over their bodies. One of the toddlers blinked at Josef's silhouette standing in the doorway. The child yawned and turned away from Josef, burying her face into the chest of her snoring father. Josef's throbbing heartbeat filled his head as the burning baobab roared between thunderclaps.

Josef dropped his knife and stumbled out of the shelter, falling to his knees in the grass behind the village. He crawled to the tree-line and retched violently into the ferns until he was just dry-heaving, choking on his own saliva. His head was spinning; any instincts had left him with the sight of the first family. Josef clambered to his feet, wiping the vomit from his lips as he stumbled back towards the village. He stepped onto the footpath that divided the row of huts and glanced back and forth, looking for Pardus. The thunderstorm pounded through the mountains behind the village, urging Josef onward like the beat of djembe war drums.

Pardus was nowhere to be seen.

Josef began sprinting through the village, glancing inside of the huts as he passed. He saw the same thing each time; Ovimbundu women and children; elders and parents; entire families dozing peacefully amongst armed men and adolescents. Were the armed Ovimbundu men truly MPLA rebel soldiers, or were they the protectors of an indigenous tribe? Josef knew that the rebel militias often forced villagers to provide them with shelter, but the rebels scarcely offered protection in return. All of the men on guard duty were already dead... There was a sudden scream from across the clearing, and Josef turned to see Syd charging up the dirt path, running away from the timber long-house. A second scream filled the night as Xipetotec leapt over the wooden structure, landing nimbly on the path behind Syd. The utahraptor shrieked at Josef as the remaining Ovimbundu guerrillas in the village shouted awake. Pardus dove out of one of the huts as rounds from an AK-47 pounded across the sand after him. Josef grabbed Pardus and pulled him upright as Syd fired his M60 at Xipetotec.

Xipetotec barked and leapt away, clearing over a hut to the jungle beyond. Pardus stood upright and spun around, firing several rounds through the shelter he had just jumped out of. One of the bullets punched through the clay wall and hit its target; a woman and child screamed from within the shelter. *Citrinitas* utahraptors barked from the surrounding grassland as they circled the village. Ovimbundu men were beginning to pour out of the long-house from the western end of the village, firing their AK47's into the night air.

"Children *irmão*," Josef stammered. "-There's – there's *kids* "

"*Quiet*," Pardus snapped, back-handing Josef. "*Move!*"

Josef and Pardus simultaneously ducked as bullets rang down the path, skipping across the sand at their feet. Pardus grabbed Josef by the collar of his shirt and led him through a gauntlet of automatic fire. A *citrinitas* utahraptor shrieked from behind Pardus and Josef, and they dove to the ground. An Ovimbundu man stepped in front of Josef and Pardus, taking aim with a shotgun just as the screeching utahraptor pounced over their heads. The *citrinitas* utahraptor tackled the man into the sand and tore his abdomen open with its toe talons in one fluid motion. Josef stared at the spitting animal and the shrieking man beneath it as Pardus ran past the fray.

"*Children*," Josef cried out. "*There's children!*"

Josef's words were lost amongst the rifle reports, screams, and thunder. Syd fired his machine gun at any human he saw; a woman exited a hut with her child in her arms, and they were both cut down by his M60. Josef screamed when he saw the woman and child fall back into their hut. Syd didn't even notice; he was already turning to

open fire on a charging Ovimbundu man wielding a kukri machete. Syd silenced the screams of the father with another burst of fire from his belt-fed rifle.

Josef crawled on his stomach between the huts, dragging his legs through the grass towards the jungle. Pardus and Syd sprinted out after him as Xipetotec shrieked from behind. *Citrinitas* utahraptors sprinted around the village, carrying the thrashing and kicking bodies of wounded Ovimbundu men. The utahraptors ceased to pay any attention to Josef, Syd, or Pardus as the trio ducked into the darkness of the tree-line.

Syd clutched the C4 triggering mechanism and showed it to Pardus as the smoldering baobab beyond the village crashed to the ground. Syd panted and said, "I'm burning that fuckin' raptor Xipetotec once and for all, I swore to Captain Wise I would!"

"*Blow it,*" Pardus snapped. "*Dissolve it, Kinane!*"
"Don't," Josef howled, scrambling towards Syd. "*There's kids-*" There was a *click* in the darkness, and the night became infernal.

"I'm telling you - I *remember* this place," Zosimus whispered.

The Ovimbundu bounty hunter was leading Disciple and the rest of Stalker Force through rows of fragrant eucalyptus, towards the village. It had taken them nearly an hour to hike along the tree-line until they were within ear-shot of the mounting firefight. Zosimus used the burning baobab on the western horizon as a landmark as he guided the others through the forest. They could already hear the clatter of gunshots echoing through the darkness as they crept through palms and fern fronds.

"*Santa Muerte,*" Lalo whispered. "It sounds like a massacre." "We can end it," Molnar grunted, pumping his SOW shotgun. "It's too late," Disciple whispered. "We need to get them out of

there. We can't stop whatever they've started; we have to remove them from the situation."

Zosimus parted the palm plants at the edge of the tree-line and saw the village. He could clearly see a few dead bodies in the grass behind the row of huts, their throats gaping bright and wet in the canopy-sieved moonlight. The gunshots were muffled behind the adobe shelters, but the screams of the utahraptors overpowered every other sound. Through the chaos, Zosimus could hear what seemed to be the crying of a child. Zosimus's eyes opened wide and he stammered, "No,

please – *Suku*, no”

The row of huts suddenly erupted, sending chunks of smoldering clay brick flying across the savanna. Zosimus was knocked back by the concussive force of the blast, falling down beside Lalo and Molnar. Fire and smoke washed over the landscape as immolated straw and thatching grass rained down from the night sky. Lalo and Molnar tried to pull Zosimus away from the blazing village, but he was already crawling out into the clearing, towards the inferno.

“No,” Zosimus screamed. “*Suku*, no!”

A trio of shadows emerged from the fog of smoke, waving their rifles as they approached. Zosimus aimed his G3 rifle at the silhouettes; he lowered it when he recognized his partner’s soot-stained face. Josef’s eyes burned like white phosphorous through a black mask of sweat-congealed soot. He fell deadweight at Zosimus’s boots, babbling incoherently. Zosimus pulled Josef up onto his knees and shook him until the words came out in a sputtering wail.

“There – there’s kids,” Josef said. “Children, *irmão*–” “Get him out of here!” Pardus barked. He emerged from the smoke completely covered in soot, a living shadow with eyes like red coals. Syd stumbled after him, collapsing to his knees at the fringe of forest. Zosimus dragged Josef back into the jungle as the flames from the village crept towards them. Josef fought against Zosimus’s grip, trying to return to the fire.

“S top, please,” Josef cried. “Children, *irmão*, women” “Everybody, get moving,” Disciple shouted. “Into the jungle!” Xipetotec emerged from the clouds of smoke behind Josef with a

dead Ovimbundu woman in its arms. The utahraptor’s sooty pelt glowed with the light of the fire. Xipetotec didn’t seem to notice the screams at his backside; the utahraptor was focused solely on the men hiding within the forest. Xipetotec’s glowing eyes narrowed at the men of Stalker Force, fangs bared in a silent threat.

Zosimus stared past the utahraptor and saw the bodies of the remaining Ovimbundu men being consumed by the spreading flames. At first, he only saw the rebel soldiers that had been engaged in the firefight. The wounded men were screaming as they desperately swiped at the flames crawling over their bodies. Those that were already dead were being cooked down to the texture of the land; blistering and blackened; splitting apart at the seams as their scorched skin flaked away like ash.

Zosimus 's mind went blank when he saw the villagers. Ovimbundu women were lost within the fire, screaming hysterically as they danced like demons ablaze across the clearing. Some were clutching their infants, their pagnes and shawls burning brightly on their bodies. Zosimus jumped to his feet to sprint into the village, but Xipetotec stood in the way, teeth bared. Xipetotec spread his jaws and howled, taking a step towards the bounty hunter. Molnar grabbed Zosimus by the shoulders and heaved him back beneath the undergrowth. The villagers were clawing at themselves, shrieking and writhing through the emblazoned savanna. The hunched shapes of the elderly jerked spasmodically through the flames like marionettes with their strings being pulled. Zosimus fell back beside Molnar as they watched the *citrinitas* utahraptors collect the dead Ovimbundu that had yet to be claimed by the fire. Xipetotec snapped its jaws at the men and Syd screamed, blindly firing his M60 at the utahraptor.

Disciple shouted, "Retreat! Back to the jungle!"

Nobody moved.

The M60 clicked in Syd's hands; out of ammunition. He stared into the nebula of embers he had wrought with Thanatos's C4, mesmerized by the twisting, writhing bodies within the flames. Lalo stared at Xipetotec as a medical kit fell from his tremulous hands. The utahraptor shrieked again, but it did nothing to distract the men from the agonized cacophony of screams rising like smoke from the inferno. Zosimus croaked weakly, "*Nyoho Ongongo...please...bring rain...*" Xipetotec cradled the bleeding Ovimbundu woman against his chest and sprinted around the immolated huts, blending into the savanna before the flames could spread to the grass. The fire gave chase, swiftly crawling across the drought-stricken plain in pursuit of the fleeing utahraptor pack. Smoke began to rise in sheets from every horizon. The fire quickly spread across the savanna, the flames rising high enough to mask the scarred face of the moon.

"Move," Disciple pleaded. "Come on, *get up!*"

Nobody could look away from the hellish crucible.

Syd was staring slack-jawed into the blaze while Josef wept at Zosimus's feet. Andrei was vomiting behind a tree, stricken by the acrid stench of cooking flesh. Pardus sat in the lotus position beneath a eucalyptus tree as smoke slowly silhouetted his body. Lalo opened his medical kit and took out a flask of rum. He took a long pull from the flask and handed it to Molnar. When Molnar saw the flask in the corner of his eye, he quickly grabbed it and desperately choked down the biting liquor. Zosimus stared into the inferno until the screams of the dead and dying gave way to the steady crackling of cindered bones.

The fire roared through the night, ravenous and righteous. CHAPTER

TWENTY ONE– TENEBROSITAS

The storm didn't relinquish any rain upon the savanna the night that the village burned down. When the first light of dawn burst across the eastern plains, the fire had all but eaten itself out of existence. The smoke that had settled over the grassland was as thick as liquid cement. Paperflake ashes drifted like snow through the swollen red eye of the morning sun. Across the lagoon, the charred bodies of the maiasaura had ossified to charcoal around their baking egg clutches. Zosimus, Lalo, and Molnar were following the dirt path that led into the village, moving as three silhouettes through the low-hanging smoke.

Zosimus pulled his afghan scarf over his mouth to filter out the noxious fog, but it was impossible to keep the smell of scorched flesh from clawing into his sinuses. Whenever Zosimus took a breath, the acrid taste of seared tendons and boiling marrow settled upon his tongue. Zosimus glanced at Molnar and Lalo as they walked, but neither appeared to be anything more than darker shades of smoke shifting through the blinding haze.

The men had watched the village burn in silence until the fire's eventual dissipation at sunrise. Disciple had been afraid of a counter-attack by MPLA forces, but the savanna had remained silent and still as the inferno roared throughout the night. No more MPLA jeeps or Cuban BRDM2's ever came to investigate the fire, nor did anybody come to check on the dead. As far as Zosimus could tell, nobody would claim patronage to the village or its massacred inhabitants. It was as if the villagers had been a feature of the land itself; as inconsequential in death as the grass that had been consumed by the blaze.

The ground beneath the village had developed the texture of a hardened scab. Scales of charred sand crunched under the weight of Zosimus's boots. Zosimus peered through the broiling fog at the remaining shelters as he passed. Some of the adobe huts had warped into new shapes as the bubbling clay continued to melt from residual heat.

A few of the huts that were still standing had come to resemble organic crucibles, raising black clouds through their open roofs like smokestacks as the former inhabitants were cooked within. Most of the shelters were impossible to look inside of, as too much fire and smoke was still billowing out. The shelters that had lost their thatch roofs, however, allowed enough ventilation to provide the trio with glimpses of the sizzling contents therein.

The dead Ovimbundu resembled victims of Pompeii, their frail bodies twisted into rigid effigies seemingly carved from lava rock. It was impossible to discern the different ages of the dead adults, but the

children were easy to identify. There wasn't enough flesh left to mask the skeletons of the infants and newborns that had been caught within the blaze. All that remained of the Ovimbundu young were red-hot bones lying where they had once been dropped by their immolated parents.

Zosimus stepped up to a hut and watched lethargic bubbles swell and pop across the dripping adobe. His fingers skimmed across the cracks along the entrance where fire had blasted through and cooked the door frame into ceramic. Zosimus narrowed his eyes and waved his hand to clear the smoke inside. The interior of the hut was dimly lit by a few flames slithering along its conical walls. The bodies of what had once been an Ovimbundu family were still broiling within the center of the sweltering cauldron.

Zosimus believed that the family had died from smoke inhalation; their bodies weren't the charred husks that most of the others had been. The corpses were still wet with the fluids seeping out through the seams of their splitting flesh. The light of the surviving flames danced through the liquid that had settled within the eye sockets of the dead. The greasy smell of seared fat was thick in the air; Zosimus caught his breath to avoid tasting it.

Zosimus turned to Molnar and Lalo and said, "I've seen enough."

"They're going to pay," Molnar grunted. "I promise, Zosimus."

Lalo silently crossed himself, mumbling an inaudible prayer.

Zosimus led Molnar and Lalo through the silent corridor of smokestacks, out into clearer air. The rest of the men were waiting for them at the edge of the jungle. Pardus and Syd aimed their rifles at Zosimus as he emerged from the malodorous fog. Andrei and Disciple were crouched at the sprawling roots of a scarlet-leaved muchesa tree, their backs turned to the wall of smoke rising from the savanna. Josef was sitting alone, chainsmoking through the last few cigarettes in his pack. The PortugueseAngolan bounty hunter had turned mute shortly after the village began burning.

Zosimus scowled as he remembered the Portuguese soldiers they had seen suffering in the city hall of Kuito. He couldn't separate that mental image from Josef when he looked at him, hugging his knees on the ground with his back to a eucalyptus tree. An inch of ash dangled precariously from the end of a cigarette between Josef's quivering lips. Zosimus waved a hand in front of Josef's eyes, but there was no reaction. The soot on Josef's face made him look like a doppelganger of the incinerated villagers.

"We didn't see any survivors," Zosimus said. "Good work, *irmão*."

Josef didn't react; the ash fell from his neglected cigarette.

"Drop it," Disciple said. "It's over. We need to move on—" "*Move on?!*"

Molnar snapped. He pounced past Zosimus and shoved Disciple into

the forest undergrowth. Molnar turned the safety off of his SOW shotgun and raised it before anybody could intervene. He took aim at the scrambling CIA agent and said, "This is your operation, you acronym-serving *coward*! Women and children are *dead* because of you!"

The barrel of an M16 brushed against the nape of Molnar's neck.

"Mind your superiors, James," Pardus said. "Lower the weapon."

Zosimus and Lalo aimed their rifles at Pardus. Syd raised his M60.

"Listen to the man, Molnar," Syd said. "You don't understand, we-"

"You're not *men*," Molnar snapped. "You're mindless *animals*!"

Disciple held his hands over his head and rose up on quaking legs. The barrel of Molnar's SOW shotgun followed Disciple as he walked out of the undergrowth, back into the burnt clearing. Molnar continued to trail the CIA agent with the shotgun until Syd hit him from behind with the butt of his M60. Molnar barked and hit the dirt as Lalo and Zosimus rushed forward. Pardus turned his M16 onto Zosimus and Lalo, his finger on the trigger. Syd kicked the SOW shotgun aside and aimed his M60 at Molnar's prone body.

"Jesus Christ," Disciple exclaimed. "Everybody, stand down!"

"They're *murderers*," Lalo barked. "They have to pay!"

"We didn't kill anybody," Syd said. He let the M60's barrel dig into the back of Molnar's shaven scalp and looked to Disciple. "We was lookin' for that British guy, Thanatos, and found the village already burnin'. Some lightning hit that big tree it must've been what set the grass on fire. The only reason we stayed was 'cause of Xipetotec, that goddamned 'raptor! You saw 'im, Lalo!"

Molnar dove out from under Syd and grabbed the SOW shotgun, rolling to his feet. He spun the barrel of the SOW towards Pardus and fired a slug over the mercenary's shoulder. The tree behind Pardus splintered apart, but Pardus didn't flinch. He simply raised the M16 over his head and turned around to face Molnar. Syd had his M60 aimed at Molnar, but Zosimus and Lalo stepped in the way with their own rifles raised. Syd looked down at the pair and rolled his eyes, lifting the M60 over his head.

"I'm innocent," Syd muttered. "I didn't kill nobody." Pardus said, "He's telling the truth. Thanatos went AWOL-" Molnar fired his shotgun, striking the tree trunk behind Pardus. "Stop talking," Molnar said. "I wanna hear it from Kinane."

Syd swallowed uncomfortably as he stared at the baseball-sized chunk that had been taken out of the miombo tree behind Pardus. He cleared his throat and said, "I already told you the truth, Molnar. You're being a crazy son of a bitch right now, you know that? You saw what them rebels did to that guy Logos, back on the savanna. Thanatos snapped and went lookin' for revenge. Now I don't know whether that British

guy got his revenge or not, but he must've died trying. The village was burning when me, Pardus and Josef found it. Swear on my heart to die, that's the truth."

"The truth," Molnar grunted. "Like the truth about Tiger Force?"

Syd licked his chapped lips. "That's the past, and you know it."

"Tiger Force," Zosimus said. "Baby killers. Seems about right..."

"Stay out of this, African!" Syd shouted. "I'm innocent!"

"What more do you want?" Pardus said, lowering his M16. Molnar fired his shotgun a third time over Pardus's shoulder, but the mercenary simply ignored it and turned to face Disciple. "We can have war crime tribunals once we finish this operation. Thanatos was my subordinate, and I'm willing to take full responsibility for his actions. My testimony won't be any different than Kinane's, but I'll give it to any authority that asks. None of you are in charge; Disciple is. Unless he says otherwise, we're not giving in to this kangaroo court."

"You led them to the village," Molnar growled. "I know you did."

"Lower the gun, Molnar," Syd said. "I'm not asking again."

"Molnar; just do what he says," Disciple said. "Pardus is right – it doesn't matter what happened last night. These villagers were living with MPLA rebels. These people that attacked us were affiliated with the Cuban military. There can be a formal investigation into this... incident... once the mission is over. For all we know, it very well could have been a brush fire gone out of control. Thanatos also might have snapped and gone out looking for revenge. Anything's possible."

"Fuck that," Molnar said, pumping his shotgun. "This ends now."

"And then what?" Disciple grunted. "Walk back to Kuito?"

"Sure," Molnar said, staring down his iron sights. "Why not?"

Andrei put a hand on the shotgun and pushed the barrel down.

"You need to clear your head, comrade," Andrei said. "Captain Wise would have been the voice of reason - not judgment. Right now, it doesn't matter how or why the villagers died. We need to focus on our own survival, even if it means letting these potential murderers live another day. There are greater matters at stake. Kinane is right, after all; Xipetotec is here. We need to call an evac or report back to General Jericho about the possibility of DM-10 in this country."

"Absolutely not," Disciple said, shaking his head. "No evacs."

Lalo blanched. "At least tell General Jericho about Xipetotec"

"Negative," Disciple said. He cradled his M16 and walked past the others, towards the tree-line. "We don't have any radios left; they were destroyed with the XR311's. This operation has already taken two days of our time and we *have* to keep moving. The El Dorado Expeditionary Freight dock is only a half-day walk from here. If we can find a boat, we could reach the collider before nightfall. If we can find a radio there, we'll be back in Kuito by sundown for a full night's

rest.”

Disciple motioned for the others to get in formation as he stepped into the jungle, vanishing from sight beyond a stand of kiepersol trees. Pardus followed him into the forested depths as Molnar shook his head in disgust. Andrei shrugged and trailed after them with Molnar, now deflated and scowling. Lalo was the last to follow the posse through the tree line; only Syd and Zosimus remained behind with Josef.

Zosimus knelt in front of Josef. “Come on, *irmão*. Timeto go.”

Josef didn’t respond; his cigarette had burnt down to its filter.

Syd watched as Zosimus rose to his feet and walked across the clearing, into the jungle. Josef immediately began to shake once his partner was out of ear-shot. Syd walked across the clearing as Josef silently wept beneath the eucalyptus tree. Tears peeled away the soot that covered his face like skin being shed. Syd reached into his pocket and withdrew a threepound nugget of gold, extending it to Josef.

“Thank you, bounty hunter,” Syd said, placing the gold into Josef’s hand. “If we’re gonna get out of here all right, we gotta look after each other. I been through some worse shit before and I don’t mean with dinosaurs; I mean civilian casualties. General Jericho ain’t gonna come down on us, not since we helped Pardus out so well.

Everything’s gonna be clean from here on out. You’ll get your retirement with your friend and I’ll get away from this raptor huntin’ business. Just keep your mouth shut and let the big boys like me and Pardus do the talkin’ from here on out.”

Josef’s trembling fingers tightened around the gold; he didn’t speak.

Syd glanced into the forest; when he didn’t see the others, he reached down and slapped Josef hard on the side of the head. The cigarette flew from Josef’s lips as he collapsed against the roots of the eucalyptus tree. Syd grabbed Josef by the throat and lifted him off of the ground, then dropped a heavy fist into the bounty hunter’s collar bone. Josef hit the scorched earth and covered his face, but he didn’t fight back. Syd was a foot taller and a hundred pounds heavier; Josef didn’t even have the energy to defend himself.

“Get up,” Syd whispered, hoisting Josef upright. “If I ever hear a word out of your mouth about what happened last night, I swear to god I’ll cut your fucking tongue out and feed it to you. I catch you talking to that partner of yours, I’ll break his goddamn neck and cut your throat open. I ain’t goin’ to any military stockade ‘cause you got some regrets. We all got regrets, you fuckin’ euro-trash. Don’t make me regret givin’ you that gold.”

Syd spun Josef around and shoved him into the jungle’s dark maw.

“You sold me your soul, bounty hunter. I’ll take your partner’s too.”

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO– ANIMA MUNDI

The jungle that covered the foothills of Mount Chrysopoeia had received all of the rainfall from the previous night's thunderstorm. The mist collecting beneath the multi-storied canopy had coagulated to the density of clay by midday. Syd and Pardus had marched on point with Disciple throughout the arduous up-hill journey. The saturated undergrowth reached over their heads, swaddling the men in dampened darkness. Dew-dappled ferns and elephant grasses mixed the soot on their uniforms to rancid grease. When the group finally came upon the *El Dorado Expeditionary Freight* outpost they were exhausted from the heat and humidity, soaked with sweat and the steam of the jungle.

A thick wall of mist rose like a curtain around the clearing as the vapor filtered through the tree-line, lifting up into the open sky. Disciple was the first to pass through the veil of fog, emerging upon a rolling field of flowers the size of a football field. Luscious rain-soaked beard grass reached waist-high throughout the glen. Rows of ornamental rainbow eucalyptus had been planted along the perimeter of the clearing, creating a natural wall of green and scarlet-streaked bark. Abandoned construction equipment and transport vehicles sat stripped of their parts in the shade of the tree-line canopy.

"Finally," Disciple said, taking out his binoculars. "El Dorado." Disciple looked through his binoculars to the opposite end of the clearing, a hundred meters away. There was a break in the tree-line where a dock on the muddy bank of the Akhmim River was visible. Disciple looked down the length of the dock and whistled; an old weather-worn tugboat was lashed to the wooden pier.

Disciple lowered the binoculars and said, "It looks like we might have a way out of this. There's a tugboat sitting by the shipping outpost; if it still runs, we'll make it to the collider by nightfall. That means we'll be back in Kuito by midnight for a late meal and some rest."

There were neither cheers nor revelry from the rest of the men as they followed the CIA agent into the clearing. Pardus and Syd remained on point while Zosimus and Lalo protected their sides. Andrei remained in the center of the formation, armed with only his service pistol.

Molnar and Josef brought up the rear, their rifles raised. Josef had remained trapped in his shell-shocked stupor throughout their morning journey, constantly shaking and flinching from any sudden external stimuli. Zosimus hadn't spoken to Josef during the hike; he wouldn't admit it, but he was ashamed and disgusted with his bounty-hunting partner. Zosimus had remained silent, in his own head, until he entered the clearing.

"*Nyoho Ongongo*," Zosimus gasped. "I've returned to you."

Zosimus immediately recognized the glade from long before the war; decades back, before it had become a shipping outpost for El Dorado

Expeditionary Freight. He remembered the luscious field of trident grasses and orchids from the landscapes of his dreams. Every shade of every color imaginable was manifested in the petals that blanketed the uneven terrain. The kaleidoscopic field wavered vibrantly in the breeze, like a painter's palette being stirred by immaterial hands. The men moved lazily across the low knolls as vultures circled in pinwheels overhead. Zosimus could still taste rendered human fat on his tongue; the rest of the group smelled like death.

Zosimus allowed his eyes to fall upon the fractalized patterns of the pastel petals pooling around his waist. He could recall coming upon the same field as a child while hunting with his father and older brother, Eammon. It had been after the death of Zosimus and Eammon's mother, when the world had first become sinister and soulless in the bounty hunter's fractured young mind.

Zosimus remembered that he had been tracking springboks with his father and Eammon when they visited the edenic glade beside the Akhmim River. Zosimus and Eammon's mother had been the first person in the *Onjoi* tribe to find the paradise beside Panopolis. That was before Zosimus and his mother had discovered the gold that had led to her violent rape and murder.

Zosimus could envision the past as if it were just another recurring nightmare. The glade had stretched before him like an expressionist painting, the delicately designed flowers blending together beneath the murky-blue sky at dusk. Zosimus began to mentally drift between the past and the present as he thought of his father's words on that childhood journey, after the burial of his mother.

Zosimus could still hear his father's voice in his head.

"This is where your mother resides, my son. You may not yet understand, but when you die, your *n'ma*, your soul, returns to our creator *Suku*. Our bodies will be broken down and become whole again as a part of the motherland; *Nyoho Ongongo*. This is what your mother has become through death; beauty, creation, and the resurrection of life itself. She lives on in these flowers, and in all of the animals they nourish..."

"Zosimus," Disciple grunted. "Pay attention."

Zosimus shook his head, suddenly aware of the sun's oppressive heat. A halo of tsetse flies was orbiting around his sweating scalp. He held his G3 rifle in one hand and extended the other to the flowers as he walked, allowing the soft petals to skim across his arid palm. In a split-second his mind was back in the realm of his childhood, when he had once stood beside his father as they watched Eammon stalk the glade in search of springbok and antelope. Zosimus remembered how foolish he had felt as a child for crying beneath his father's watchful

eye.

“Take a deep breath; smell the orchids,” Zosimus’s father had said, inhaling the wind-swept incense with a swelling breath. “Do you smell that? That is the perfume of your mother, reborn through *Nyoho Ongongo*. The *n’ma* of your mother is here with us. Can you feel her presence?”

At that age, nearing adolescence, Zosimus had long become tired of being the son of his tribe’s *Sekulu Ocini baiida*, the *Onjoi*’s shamanistic chieftain. Zosimus had obeyed his father, shutting his eyes tightly to ‘feel’ for his mother’s presence within *Nyoho Ongongo*, the land itself. Zosimus could remember the darkness behind his pinched lids, the strange feeling of floating without a body within the empty void of his own mind. After a few seconds, Zosimus had finally sighed and said, “I...I feel...nothing.”

“That ‘nothing’ is the world of *Suku*, beyond our sight,” Zosimus’s father had said with a bittersweet grin. “Your mother’s body has become one with this forest, and her *n’ma* has become one with *Suku* beyond our realm of perception. Your mother is nurturing the jungle and its wildlife just as she has nurtured you and Eammon. Her *n’ma*, her soul; that is with *Suku*, where we shall all return to after death...”

Zosimus was jarred from his memories when he tripped over a moss-laden kiepersol log. Josef stopped walking and extended a hand to his partner, but Zosimus ignored him and climbed to his feet. Josef kept his shaking hand outstretched and muttered, “Be careful, *irmão*—”

“You’re not my brother,” Zosimus grunted. “You’re *ondele*.”

Zosimus walked past Josef without a second glance and returned to his position in the formation. His eyes traced the tree-line, burrowing into the engorged shadows beyond the green-and-red striped trunks of rainbow eucalyptus. He could practically see himself as a child, standing beside his father on the opposite end of the clearing. Zosimus had never told the *Onjoi* tribe the truth of his mother’s rape and murder; he had blamed the attack on a man-eating leopard. A decade of nightmares had been born from the guilt behind his lie.

“You must not be afraid of the leopard,” Zosimus’s father had said. “Our brother, the leopard, is simply another part of *Nyoho Ongongo*, just as we are. A leopard only knows its instincts, to hunt and kill, to feed itself and its kin. They are one with *Nyoho Ongongo* and *Suku*, serving as their vessels, just as we are. Without the hunger of the

leopards, we wouldn't be able to discern the men from the baboons. Without our brothers, there would be no order in these lands."

Zosimus could feel his eyes watering, both in the past and the present. He saw the field blur into a nauseating puddle of spilled acrylics through his languished tears. He felt the words he had spoken to his father on his lips as he searched the sky for vultures; an omen following the soot-covered soldiers. Zosimus remembered telling his father, "The leopard that killed mama wasn't an animal; it was a monster. *Onde*."

"Someday you will understand, my son," Zosimus's father had said. "There is no *onde* in the jungle. The only *onde* that exists in this world is in the hearts of men, not in *Nyoho Ongongo*. Only man kills his kin for selfish intentions and fear, becoming nightmares within the dreams of our creator *Suku*. Never forget that, my son; you must never let your fear turn you into another of *Suku*'s nightmares, neither a leopard nor a baboon."

"I'm not afraid," Zosimus had said, staring at his father defiantly. "I will kill any leopard I see, and I will be the protector of the *Onjoi*. *Suku* doesn't need leopards, he needs *me*."

Zosimus could remember how heartily his father had laughed, throwing back his mane of dreadlocks. Even though it had seemed patronizing to Zosimus, his father had seen the warrior heart within his young *Onjoi* son. Zosimus couldn't help but feel a long-forgotten warmth in his heart when he remembered the sound of his father's deep, rich laughter in that moment.

"That's the spirit, my son," Zosimus's father had said. "But don't forget; you need the leopards and baboons just as much as you need the guidance of *Suku*. Man cannot protect *Nyoho Ongongo* alone; he needs his brothers by his side. If you are afraid of your brothers, be they man or animal, work your way through that fear to find clarity. Fight for your peace of mind and strengthen your bravery. When you do that, you will learn what it means to be a warrior, *and* a leader, my son."

Zosimus's father had put a hand on his shoulder as they looked over the gardens of *Nyoho Ongongo* in quiet appreciation. Zosimus had believed in the truth within his father's words, but he never escaped the fear of death that had been born from his mother's murder. Zosimus had known that when he became a teenager he would have to take part in *Olutanu Suku Onjoi*; the Trial of *Suku*'s Dreams. *Olutanu*

Suku Onjoi was a ritual in which teenage *Onjoi* boys were forced to take Iboga, a powerful hallucinogenic drug that would force the adolescents to experience death, the realm of *Suku*, head-on. With his worldview shattered by the rape and beheading of his mother, Zosimus didn't believe he would ever find a way through his fear in the face of death.

Instead, Zosimus fled to Silva Porto to join the Portuguese army.

Pardus hissed, "*Quit day-dreaming, bounty hunter.*" Zosimus stumbled through the flowers to a stop. He looked over his shoulder and saw the rest of the men crouching beneath the blanket of orchids. The tops of their helmets pockmarked the glade like tortoise shells floating in a psychedelic oasis. Zosimus felt a hand lash around his wrist and he was yanked down beneath the foliage by Pardus.

Zosimus went to speak, but Pardus put a finger in front of his own lips and tilted his head to the left. A deep, familiar rumbling resounded from across the clearing. Zosimus's eyes opened wide and he fastened his jaw shut. He slowly rose to the balls of his feet and spread apart the overarching flowers. On the opposite end of the glade, where Zosimus had imagined himself standing with his father, was the male carnotaurus that had killed Eros, the Israeli mercenary.

The carnotaurus moved slowly, the scales on its serpentine body glinting like tiger-eye gems in the sunlight. The carnotaurus snorted like a bulldog, its blunt snout darting sporadically from left to right as its beady eyes studied the field. The carnotaurus's turquoise-flecked face was hideous in the daylight; heavily scarred and malformed, with knobbed horns looming over each eyebrow. The carnotaurus growled lowly as its lips peeled back from cracked and chipped fangs.

The unearthly growl of the male carnotaurus was returned from the opposite end of the clearing. Zosimus remained still as he looked to the left side of the glade. A second carnotaurus was leering at the splendid field from the adjacent tree-line. The huge animal moved quickly through the shadows of the forest, its body a dark silhouette adorned with scant patches of canopy-sieved light. The carnotaurus sauntered out from the shade of the rainbow eucalyptus, squinting as it entered the sunny knoll. The second carnotaurus had slightly smaller horns, and the rocky scutes that covered its body resembled dusty shards of sandstone.

First a male; now a female.

The female carnotaurus waded slowly through the orchids, tilting its head to gaze beneath the veil of flowers. The male carnotaurus snapped its jaws eagerly as it approached from the right side of the field. The nostrils on the end of the male's thin snout bulged as it sniffed the putrid scent of broiled human flesh. The sound of the

carnotaurus's clacking jaws made Zosimus flinch. He gripped his G3 rifle in both hands and thought of his father's words from so long ago. *Move through your fear.*

"We're surrounded," Andrei whispered from within the center of the circle of men. "We have to make a break for it, or we have to stand and fight. We can't wait any longer. They'll find us in an instant."

"Especially if they hear you," Pardus hissed.

Andrei nodded in agreement and kept his mouth shut.

"We have to run," Syd muttered. His eyes were wide as he stared at the female carnotaurus through a frame of scarlet petals. Wavering heat rays shimmered across the female's pale, armored body. Syd said, "We can't fight them; we have to run, *now*."

"We can fight them off," Molnar whispered. "Hold your ground."

"No," Syd croaked, licking his chapped lips. "Not like this."

"Coward," Molnar growled. "Captain Wise would be ashamed—"

"*Be quiet*," Disciple hissed. "*They can hear us*."

The carnotaurus appeared to be listening; they were watching each other from across the field, but their heads were cocked like curious dogs. The male carnotaurus slowly paced closer to the group. The dusty-scaled female carnotaurus moved towards her mate, her snaking body winding over the tall grass. As the female approached, she tilted her head to peer through the flowers at the ground below. Zosimus gripped his G3 rifle; he tasted copper where he had chewed his lower lip open.

The men were trapped between the two carnotaurus.

Syd whispered, "*We have to run*."

"*You first*," Molnar hissed back. "*Coward*."

Zosimus felt a chill as a shadow fell upon his back. He looked up through the ceiling of flowers and saw the muscular hind-leg of the male carnotaurus. Zosimus had to narrow his eyes; the sunlight reflecting from the theropod's shimmering scarlet scales was blinding. The sun was blotted out behind the blackened horns of the demonic animal.

The male carnotaurus growled lowly and the air trembled around Zosimus's head. His courage left him with the release of adrenaline. He suddenly felt weak; numb with terror beneath the shadow of a hellish carnivore. Zosimus's eyes climbed over the rotund angles of the male carnotaurus's skull, skimming the scars that checkered its leathery cheeks. The chugging respirations of the male carnotaurus filled the clearing as its breathing intensified with excitement.

The carnotaurus had them cornered; it only had to spot them.

Zosimus allowed his eyes to fall upon the other men. Molnar and Lalo were poised to fight the dinosaurs, with their rifles at the ready and looks of steely determination on their faces. Syd was shivering beside

them, cowering behind his M60. His handle-bar moustache was dripping wet with cold sweat. Andrei was crouched behind Disciple, tightly gripping the straps of his rucksack and ready to run for his life. Zosimus didn't bother to look at Josef; not after the village burning. Zosimus and Disciple locked eyes just as the wide ostrich-like foot of the female carnotaurus dug into the earth between them. Zosimus felt a crashing wave of adrenaline that nearly sent him up into the air with hysteria. The flowers in the field trembled with the grunts and groans of the carnotaurus. Zosimus no longer felt like a contestant in the game of survival; his sense of fight-or-flight had made him into a mindless puppet to be controlled by instinct.

Without a word, Disciple spun away from the group and charged out of the grass, sprinting across the clearing. The female carnotaurus jumped back in alarm, crying shrilly like a startled bird, and the rest of the men dashed across the field after Disciple. Zosimus stumbled out after them, his legs bowing beneath him. He heard the male carnotaurus bellow ferociously and a wave of adrenaline stimulated his nervous system, propelling him forward through the sun-washed knoll.

The carnotaurus roared louder than lions as they gave chase, pounding their feet across the lush field. Zosimus panted as he looked over his shoulder, watching the brilliant burgundy body of the male carnotaurus glittering in the sunlight. The male carnotaurus locked eyes with Zosimus and roared, spit flying from its parting maw. The men ran as fast as they could as they were carried along by their remaining reserves of adrenaline. The sun weighed their bodies down and the oppressive heat stifled their respirations. The only sound in the clearing was the jostling of the men's equipment and the steady thumping of the pursuing carnotaurus' footsteps. The heavy panting of the carnotaurus audibly smothered the panicked shouts coming from the fleeing men.

Josef and Molnar were at the back of the formation, desperately chasing after the others towards the break in the tree-line at the end of the glade, where the *El Dorado Expeditionary Freight* outpost sat. The carnotaurus were gaining speed too quickly, closing the distance with each passing second. Josef looked back and saw the male carnotaurus snapping its jaws only three feet away from his shoulder. The pursuing carnivore's wyvern-like body pivoted over the grass as its legs kicked knee-deep through the flowers.

Josef tripped over the uneven terrain and hit the ground face-first, sending up a multicolored shower of petals, but Molnar quickly pulled him back up. The other men were already several meters ahead and hadn't noticed. Molnar looked over his shoulder and saw the male carnotaurus rapidly approaching, the body growing larger with each

passing millisecond, and he knew that escape was futile. Molnar raised his SOW shotgun and pulled the trigger, firing a chain of slugs at the charging theropod.

The male carnotaurus twisted its head and barked in pain, but it didn't lose any of its momentum. The carnotaurus lowered its head and thrust its horns into Josef's legs, tossing him high into the open air. Josef screamed as he sailed across the clearing until he struck the earth, tumbling uncontrollably through the beard grass. The female carnotaurus bellowed and turned towards Josef, kicking up a flurry of fuchsia and scarlet orchids as her taloned feet threshed the field. Zosimus heard Josef's screams and planted his heels in the ground to turn around, but Andrei crashed into him from behind. The two men hit the ground and the others staggered to a stop around them. The male carnotaurus howled as another blast from Molnar's SOW shotgun echoed through the clearing. Zosimus turned and saw Molnar backpedaling away from the approaching male carnotaurus, towards the group. Molnar swapped another magazine into his automatic shotgun and continued firing at the male carnotaurus's armored chest. The male carnotaurus lunged forward and snapped its jaws around Molnar's shoulder just as he tried to dive away.

A scream ripped through Molnar's lips as the teeth of the male carnotaurus shattered his collar bone and scapula like glass. The male carnotaurus let go of Molnar, allowing him to fall limp beneath the bloodsplashed flowers. His shoulder was gone; a wide gash was all that remained between Molnar's neck and his nearly-severed arm. The male carnotaurus kicked Molnar across the field, gashing deep wounds through his chest that revealed the gleaming bones of his ribcage. The beating of his heart was visible through the exposed, sinuous flesh. "Stop," Syd howled. His voice was strained, cracking with exhaustion and agony. Syd unleashed a volley of automatic fire from his M60, but the bullets barely penetrated the male carnotaurus's rocky hide. The rest of the team opened fire on the carnivore, trying to divert its attention from their dying team-mate. The male carnotaurus ignored the bullets pecking at its body as it tore Molnar's mangled arm off with a twist of its neck.

"Help," Josef screamed across the clearing. "*Irmão, help me!*"

Zosimus spun around and saw Josef crawling towards a bulldozer beneath the tree-line, seeking refuge from the approaching female carnotaurus. Josef attempted to climb to his feet, but a broken femur protruding through his thigh kept him flat on his stomach. The female carnotaurus loomed over Josef, tilting her head from side to side as she watched his mangled, dragging legs. With a deep, crocodilian hiss, the female carnotaurus lunged forward and closed her jaws around Josef's head.

“No!” Zosimus screamed. “*Irmão!*”

Zosimus leapt to his feet and sprinted across the clearing, occasionally stopping mid-step to fire his G3 rifle at the female carnotaurus’s hooded eyes. A bullet splashed into the female carnotaurus’s right orbital socket and she bellowed in pain, dropping Josef in the process. Josef fell back to the ground and screamed from beneath a wave of lavender petals. The female carnotaurus stepped over his crumpled body, dripping viscera from her gored eye onto the flowers below. Zosimus jumped in front of the female carnotaurus, shoving her boxy snout aside while simultaneously plunging his kukri machete into the side of her neck. The female carnotaurus reared her head back and screamed as a steady stream of blood erupted from her throat. The female carnotaurus tried to spot Zosimus by tilting her head to the side, but she was handicapped by her missing eye. Zosimus feigned around the female carnotaurus’s blind side, keeping out of sight. He leapt forward and grabbed the handle of the machete with both hands, dragging it down through her flesh. Zosimus ripped the kukri free from the female carnotaurus’s sandstone hide and fell back beside Josef.

The female carnotaurus screeched as her entry wound was spread into a wide gash, spilling blood onto Zosimus and Josef’s bodies. Zosimus ducked out of the way of the female carnotaurus’s swinging horns, falling back on top of Josef. Zosimus covered Josef with one arm and raised the kukri machete in his other hand, aiming it at the enraged, howling carnivore.

The female carnotaurus backed away, lowering her head while whimpering pitifully. Her hideous face seemed to show signs of fear; the female carnotaurus’s remaining eye was twitching spasmodically and dripping with tears. The torn and bleeding lips on her curved jaws were curled back in a mixture of revulsion and pain. The female carnotaurus cried meekly and turned away from the bounty hunters, facing her mate across the field. The male carnotaurus was pacing around the clearing, dragging Molnar’s mutilated corpse in its narrow jaws.

Zosimus stared as the female carnotaurus ran across the field to her mate, brushing along the length of his body with her own. Syd continued to hold down heavy fire on the carnivores as they fled to the tree-line, chiseling away at their rocky scutes with his M60. The female carnotaurus cowered behind her mate and howled from over his shoulder as they ducked into the shadowy confines of the forest. The male carnotaurus uttered a final defiant roar before dragging Molnar’s twisted body into the darkness beyond the rainbow eucalyptus.

Zosimus watched the snaking silhouettes of the carnotaurus until they

had vanished beyond the furthest stand of trees. He could hear the panicked cries of *kinda* baboons calling to one another as their tree-top homes were jostled by the fleeing theropods. Zosimus panted as he looked towards the rest of the team approaching; he was shaken, but otherwise unharmed. The Ovimbundu bounty hunter looked down at his partner, and his heart seized mid-beat.

Josef's face was no longer recognizable. The handsome mask he had once vainly displayed to the world resembled a lacerated piece of ghastly white leather. His scalp had been peeled away from his skull, draped over his eyes like a hood. A steady stream of frothy blood was seeping through Josef's teeth, which were no longer concealed by any lips. The face that Zosimus had grown to recognize as his brother now resembled a bloody Picasso painting.

"*Lalo*," Zosimus gasped, unable to look away. "*Come here, hurry!*"

Josef groaned and cherry-red bile jettisoned from his seizing jaws. He shook violently in Zosimus's arms; the striations of his facial muscles clenched like worms snapping taught where his cheeks had once been. Tears fell from Zosimus's unblinking eyes as he desperately clutched at Josef's torn black shirt. He couldn't look away from the crimson-painted bones emerging from his only friend's face. A dizzying whine of tinnitus filled Zosimus's ears as he pleaded for Josef, unconsciously whimpering a prayer for him in the Umbundu language.

Lalo dropped to his knees beside Zosimus and fought to pull Josef away from him. The Cuban medic rolled Josef onto his side and a stream of bile and blood tumbled out from his pearly-white jawbones. Several molars and incisors fell onto Lalo's lap, but he didn't notice; he was still mentally reeling from Molnar's death. Lalo snapped open his medical kit and began a desperate attempt at patching Josef's face back together. He inserted a syrette of morphine into Josef's neck, and another, and a third after that.

"*Irm irmão*," Zosimus wheezed, still unblinking. "*Irmão* "

"Just stay calm, *hermano*," Lalo said. "Let me work."

Lalo was using superglue to reattach Josef's scalp to his skull; a trick he had learned from Xavier Wise while serving in Vietnam. Josef groaned and his glistening jawbones sifted through the collage of striated muscular tissue. Lalo wrapped Josef's face in bandages and gauze until he was no longer visible. Bright burgundy stains quickly seeped through the bright-white fabric, bestowing a bloody Rorschach blot upon the face of Josef's tightly woven mask.

"We have to go," Lalo said. "Zosimus, help me carry him."

Zosimus didn't move. He remembered his father's words.

She lives on in these flowers, and in all of the animals they nourish.

The El Dorado Expeditionary Freight outpost was little more than a concrete pillbox bunker sitting beside a bend of the Akhmim River. The mangrove canopy was thick over the ruddy waters, fully concealing the light of the mid-day sun. Zosimus was lost within his own mind, numbly following Lalo's lead as they carried Josef's limp body towards the lone tugboat lashed to the outpost's pier. The others were gathered in a ring around them, with Disciple and Pardus on point. Disciple directed the rest of the group towards the pier and stepped aside, turning towards the bunker.

"Kinane; go see if the tugboat runs," Disciple said. "Pardus and Zosimus; keep watch. Doctor Wynn; help Flores take Josef onto the ship. I'm going to check out the inside of the building and see what kind of supplies or intel I can find."

Disciple jogged across the clearing and crouched in front of the blast door of the bunker. While Disciple worked on picking the lock, the rest of the men set about their given objectives. Syd ran down the pier towards the tugboat, his heavy boots clapping against the dirt-encrusted planks. Zosimus and Lalo were following close behind, carrying Josef by his arms and legs. Pardus paid them little mind as he walked along the perimeter of the clearing, his M16 raised. He winked at Andrei as the scientist hurried onto the weatherworn pier.

Andrei reached for Josef's legs and said, "Here, let me—" "*Get away,*" Zosimus snapped. He cleared his throat uncomfortably when he recognized the hostility in his own voice. He gently cradled Josef's legs and said, "I'm sorry I've got *meu irmão*."

"Do what the CIA agent told you, bounty hunter," Lalo said. "Doctor Wynn will help me carry your *hermano* onto the boat. If we're lucky, the boat will work and"

"No," Zosimus said, pulling Josef away from Lalo. "Just let me make sure he's safe, I can't let anything—"

"*Hermano*," Lalo grunted impatiently. "Let me do my job."

"You can trust us," Andrei said. "We won't let anything happen to your comrade. We won't let anybody else near him."

Zosimus watched Andrei and Lalo warily for a few seconds, listening to the songs of the turaco and spurfowl birds overhead. Zosimus sighed and handed Josef's lower body to the Russian scientist. Andrei took Josef's legs and helped Lalo to hoist him off the forest floor, grunting with effort. A soft moan filtered through Josef's blood-soused mask of gauze. He stirred slightly between the pair as they carried him down the pier towards the tugboat. Andrei stopped to look over his shoulder at Zosimus.

"Make sure there are no dinosaurs around," Andrei said. "And keep an

eye on Pardus. I wouldn't let him out of your sight. Disciple, either, for that matter."

Zosimus looked across the clearing and saw Pardus pacing along the tree-line of the glen. Disciple was standing at the door of the pillbox bunker with his back turned to them, cursing beneath his breath while pounding the padlock in frustration. Zosimus looked back to the pier and saw Syd clambering around the tugboat, climbing a ladder to the upper deck where the captain's box was positioned. The ship was an old workhorse; a relic from the times when Angola's rivers were secure trade routes for gold, oil, and other exploitable resources.

"There's living quarters below-decks," Syd called from the captain's box. "Get the wounded bounty hunter onboard. I'm gonna see if this old girl runs."

A dry growl swelled from deep within the ship's gullet. The water behind the stern of the ship began to bubble and roil as the tugboat's propellers churned against the current. A pillar of black smoke rose from an exhaust port on the upper deck, beside the captain's box. Syd coughed as a black cloud flowed in through the broken windows. He brushed shards of broken porthole glass off of the control console and hollered out, "I think she's got enough fuel for the trip upriver. Looks like our hiking is over!"

"You hear that, comrade?" Andrei said to Zosimus. "Everything's going to be okay. Just keep an eye on the forest and let us know if you see anything, alright? I'm gonna help Lalo below-decks so he can keep working on Josef's... *salvageable* injuries."

Zosimus nodded. His eyes remained on Josef's facial bandages.

"Keep him safe," Zosimus said. "If Pardus or Syd get in the way..."

"They won't," Lalo said. "If we need you, you'll hear us. Trust me."

"Okay," Zosimus said, twitching his head in a forced nod. He made eye contact with Andrei, then Lalo, and took a deep breath. "I'm sorry"

"No worries, *hermano*," Lalo said. "Just clear your head."

Zosimus took his G3 rifle in both hands and turned away, walking across the clearing. He glanced back to watch as Lalo and Andrei carried Josef's body over the dock, heaving him onto the boat's deck like a sack of flour. Syd guided them to a door beneath the captain's box that led below decks to the living quarters, out of sight. Pardus was still patiently circling the clearing, aiming his rifle at every shadow beyond the tree-line while Disciple grunted and growled at the door of the bunker.

Zosimus cleared his throat uncomfortably and looked over his own body. He hadn't even thought to check if he had been wounded by the female carnotaurus. Josef's screams had consumed all but every thought in Zosimus's head after the attack. He could scarcely think at all; every sensation in his body urged him to return to the boat, to

make sure his partner was still breathing.

Zosimus stared at his forearms; they were covered in shallow scratches and ugly bruises. The screaming baboon tattoo on Zosimus's left forearm was stained with Josef's blood and vomit. Zosimus's dripping-wet fingers began to curl and stretch as they succumbed to the weight of his own staring eyes. The despondent shrieks of anguished *chacma* baboons echoed from the miombo canopy across the river. Zosimus immediately flinched, squeezing his G3 rifle tightly. His knees shook and his body folded to the earth.

Zosimus dropped his G3 rifle and covered his head with his hands. His fingertips bit through the flesh of his nappy scalp. A whimpering sob was trapped in Zosimus's throat. The screams of the burning villagers fully possessed his conscious mind. Zosimus hiccupped, choking, as he clenched his eyes shut. He held his breath and focused on following his father's wisdom, of sensing his mother or *Suku* within the forest. It was the only thing he could think to do to suppress the agonized shrieks rising within his subconscious.

Zosimus kept his eyes pinched shut until the phantoms wailing within his mind fell silent, giving way to the music of the forest wildlife.

When Zosimus opened his eyes, he saw the world brilliantly illuminated through the lens of his involuntary tears. The surface of everything he surveyed; the gnarled bark of eucalyptus trees, palm fronds shimmering along the muddy bank beneath the decaying sun; seemed to be laced with prismatic light.

Zosimus hadn't openly wept since he was sixteen, when he abandoned the *Onjoi* tribe to join the Portuguese military. The shameful weakness that Zosimus felt in the present was familiar to him; it was the same as he had felt while watching his mother's remains being buried beneath a veil of bougainvillea petals. Zosimus wiped the tears from his eyes, feeling just as hollow and bitter as he had on the day that his mother died. After drying his eyes and blinking a few times, Zosimus looked up and saw Pardus watching him from beneath a ficus on the river bend, slowly sharpening his ka-bar with a pocket whetstone.

Zosimus picked up his G3 rifle, glaring at Pardus.

Pardus simply shrugged and pocketed his whetstone, spinning the ka-bar in one hand as he left the shade of the ficus. Zosimus faced away from Pardus and wiped a finger along the rims of his sunken eyes. Josef's blood was streaked like war-paint beneath the bounty hunter's orbital sockets. Zosimus exhaled shakily and raised his G3 rifle as he watched the forest for movement. Zosimus knew that when he had run away from the *Onjoi* tribe to enlist in the Portuguese military, he had been trading in a life with his remaining family to escape his own fear of death.

Josef was Zosimus's only remaining family; his brother; his *irmão*.

Zosimus was more afraid of losing Josef than he was to die.

“Got it,” Disciple grunted.

Disciple clicked a final pin into place and heard the padlock release. He looked over his shoulder and saw that the rest of the men were still preoccupied with their assigned duties. He gently pushed the steel door open as the hinges crackled with the resistance of rust. Disciple raised his M16 and stepped inside, scanning the shadows within over the barrel of the rifle.

The interior of the bunker was pitch-black and choked with dust. The only light was a single sunlit square cast on the floor from the open doorway. Yellowing sheets of paperwork were scattered across the molded floor. Muddy boot prints were painted across the cement, revealing the steps taken before a hasty retreat. Disciple presumed that whoever had locked up the shipping outpost had been in a hurry; unless somebody else had ransacked the place before throwing on a padlock.

Disciple pulled the steel door shut behind him and turned on the flashlight mounted to the barrel of his M16. The small beam of light skimmed over mildewed desks that sat in a row along the right-hand wall. A row of wire racks, stocked with mechanical apparatuses and boxes of shipping dossiers, stood in the center of the room. Disciple placed his M16 on one of the shelves and took off his rucksack. He unzipped the largest pocket and took out a few bricks of C4; white plastic explosives wrapped in black electrical tape. Disciple assumed he would only need two or three bricks to destroy the shipping outpost; the rest of the C4 in his pack would be saved for the collider.

The steel door groaned through its rusted hinges as it slowly swung open. Disciple froze in the center of the room, leaning over his rucksack with two bricks of C4 in his hands. The light pouring in from the open door was blinding in the dark, windowless enclosure. A lone figure was standing in the doorway, slowly spinning a ka-bar blade in one hand. When Pardus spoke, his voice cut through Disciple's confidence like a dagger.

"Find anything interesting?"

"Get out of here, Pardus," Disciple growled. "Go do your job." "I *am* doing my job; I'm keeping you safe," Pardus said. He

stepped inside and pulled the door shut, enclosing the pair in darkness. Disciple's rifle was several feet away, on the opposite side of the shelving unit that stood in the center of the room. A pair of boxes with electrical equipment blocked Disciple from Pardus's line of sight. Disciple squeezed his revolver tightly in one hand and backed away from the shelf.

"Your job is to listen to my orders," Disciple said, quietly stepping around the back-end of the wire rack. "Go back outside and check the perimeter. You left your post last night, and it could have gotten us all killed. Do your actual job for once and *do as I say*."

Pardus laughed from the shadows. "What are you afraid of?" "Stop talking and *get out*," Disciple growled. "You won't play mind-games with me anymore. Get back outside before I throw you out myself."

Disciple could see the flashlight bulb on his rifle glowing only a few feet ahead. He took plaintive steps, careful not to scrape any of the dirtencrusted paperwork against the cement underfoot. He placed the C4 on the shelving unit and reached for his M16, aiming the revolver in his other hand at the shadows. Pardus was somewhere in the dark,

claustrophobic space. He was breathing so softly that Disciple could scarcely hear it.

“Did you just *threaten* me?” Pardus whispered.

Disciple didn’t speak. He felt the wire shelving beneath his outstretched fingers as he slowly reached for the M16. His fingers brushed the stock, and he grasped the trigger-guard.

“You’re not a soldier; you’re a *federal agent*,” Pardus said. His voice seemed to be circling Disciple, bouncing off of the walls and scattering through the darkness. “Don’t think I don’t know you, Disciple. Jericho tells me everything. Your brother used to have a job like mine, back before he died in Vietnam.”

Disciple paused, holding the M16 half-way off of the wire rack. He hadn’t disturbed the direction of the flashlight, so as to not give away his position. The revolver in his right hand was getting slick with cold sweat.

“I knew him by his old callsign, ‘Shadow’,” Pardus whispered. “He trained me when I was still serving with the ‘Panthers’, that failed counter-guerilla program that Jericho ran in Vietnam. Shadow showed me how to be more than just a soldier; he taught me how to kill. Everything I’ve done, I learned from your older brother.”

Disciple slowly dragged the rifle off of the shelving unit, tilting the beam of the flashlight towards the door. He caught a glimpse of Pardus’s pant-leg swinging through the beam, receding into further darkness.

“It’s a shame he never trained you to be a warrior like him, a warrior like he trained me to become,” Pardus whispered dissonantly. “You’re just a pet for the Pentagon; a child sent to be the eyes and ears of disconnected bureaucrats. Nothing more than a pawn like the other soldiers outside.”

Disciple immediately holstered his revolver and raised his rifle in both hands. He scanned his surroundings over the rifle barrel, backing up against the computer desks along the wall.

“You’re a murderer,” Disciple said. “Nothing more.” “And you’re nothing but a *liar*” Pardus hissed. “And a *coward*.” Disciple paused, momentarily paralyzed by the venomous truth. “So we both have our faults,” Pardus continued to whisper.

“You’re here for a very important task and nobody can know what it really is. Every memo gets redacted, right? There’s nothing you can say to surprise me; Jericho already told me everything that’s been buried beneath the black ink. I know what’s been happening in the shadows every since your brother died in Vietnam; that same week we discovered the dinosaurs with Vulture Squad...”

Disciple walked along the wall, tilting the rifle towards the direction of Pardus’s voice. Musty clouds swirled in the beam of light, veiling concrete walls desecrated with black mold. The door was only a few steps away; the C4 trigger was in his pocket. Disciple hoped he could leave Pardus locked inside of the outpost with the C4 detonating, effectively killing two birds with one stone.

“I know you can’t see well in here; you’re probably more used to the fluorescent lighting in the Pentagon,” Pardus said. “I was taught by your brother Shadow to see without light. The light only blinds you to the darkness; makes you weaker with the fear of what you’ll find within it.”

“Be quiet,” Disciple muttered. He was fighting to quell the trembling in his voice. “Jericho answers to my superiors, and they won’t let you get away with whatever you’re trying to do here. I won’t let you.”

Disciple placed a hand behind his back and felt the cold steel of the blast door beneath his clammy palm. His fingers skittered across the surface of the door, feeling blindly for the handle. His pulse was galloping through his temples and his mouth was sapped dry of saliva.

“Thanks to Shadow, I can see what we’ve been trying to find, or rather, what you’ve been trying to *hide*,” Pardus whispered. “This paperwork...it’s all in English. Why would the Portuguese write their reports in English? It doesn’t make any sense. All of these dossiers abandoned by El Dorado Expeditionary Freight, all of this important intel about uranium ore shipments...who left it behind for you to erase from history?”

Disciple turned rigid. His heart was beating frantically and his searching hand became numb. He tentatively felt the door handle with his fingertips and squeezed it tightly, almost exhaling with relief. A hand tightened around Disciple’s wrist, and he gasped involuntarily. A warm breath drifted into his ear.

“I know your secrets, *coward*.”

Disciple threw his elbow back but Pardus caught it and twisted it

around, shoving Disciple against the wall. Disciple grunted and kicked off of the wall, throwing Pardus back against the metal shelving. Pardus spun on his heel and slammed Disciple against the rack, pressing his face against the wire so hard that it bit into his flesh. Disciple growled and swung his M16 back, but Pardus caught the rifle in one hand and tore it from his grasp.

“Stop fighting,” Pardus growled. *“I’m not going to hurt you.”*

Disciple thrust his boots at Pardus’s knees, but his clumsy kicks were easily dodged. The cutting edge of Pardus’s ka-bar met the side of Disciple’s neck, and the CIA agent went still. Disciple panted with desperation, pulling away from the cold touch of the blade. The panic was mounting in Disciple’s addled mind; his claustrophobia and fear of the dark was making him hysterical.

“Let go,” Disciple grunted, twisting his neck away. *“Please-”* *“Shhh,”* Pardus hissed. *“I told you, I’m not going to hurt you. Just do as I say and we’re not going to have any problems. We’re going to do each other a favor, okay? How about that? Make a simple promise and this won’t end as painfully as it has for the men you’ve led to worthless, vainglorious deaths.”*

“Just get off of me,” Disciple said. *“If you touch me, Flores and Zosimus will make you pay. They won’t let you get away with this, especially not after everything you’ve done.”*

Pardus laughed caustically against the nape of Disciple’s neck.

“That’s your best threat? A worthless African working for blood money, and a Cuban double-agent feeding intel to his commie allies? You’ll have to find some better friends while you’re out here, Disciple. I’m the man that’s going to determine whether you make it back to your family or not; not these traitorous apes nor any god you can pray to.”

Disciple threw his elbow back, but Pardus simply leaned away and pressed him harder into the shelving. Disciple coughed as the air in his throat was pinched off against metal wire.

“Don’t you get it? I’m in charge out here,” Pardus growled. *“Not you, and not that worthless bounty hunter. Kinane will do anything I say; he’s going to be a member of Quad Equitum as soon as we leave this godforsaken country. Andrei’s worthless; Josef’s as good as dead; Lalo’s working for Castro. When they all learn the truth about why we’re out here, who will you have left to protect you, besides me?”*

“You’re a murderer,” Disciple choked, pulling his throat away from Pardus’s ka-bar. Pardus grabbed Disciple’s hair and slammed his head against the metal rack. The blade slipped along Disciple’s neck, and he cried out in fear. A small trickle of blood descended from a shallow

scratch across his throat.

"We're going to do each other a favor," Pardus said, wiping the blood off of Disciple's windpipe. "I'm not going to tell everybody what we're really doing in this country, and I'll keep you alive until we make it back to civilization. Once we part ways, we'll never see each other again. If I say we're doing something, we're doing it. No deliberations necessary. Understand?"

Disciple didn't speak, so Pardus struck the back of his head with the bottom of his palm. Disciple's head ricocheted off of the shelf with a skeletal *crack*.

"Don't make me ask again, *Mr. Shinoda*."

"Yes," Disciple gasped. "I understand!"

"Good," Pardus grunted. "We'll get your job done, but you're not going to speak a word of this to any of your superiors. I'm sure those radios on the XR311's weren't the only way you were keeping in touch with your employers. The Pentagon wouldn't risk losing contact with such a valuable pawn as yourself."

"I don't have anything," Disciple coughed. "If we can get to the collider, we might be able to find a radio and raise an evac. It's the best that we can hope for right now."

Pardus laughed. "Funny, to think that this collider could give us a direct link to our only way out. What are the chances of that? If you can get ahold of an evac and leave me out of your report, you might have a shot at getting out of here alive. You'll be fine so long as you stay quiet and let me lead like Jericho wanted."

"We can't lose any more men," Disciple whispered hoarsely. His throat was pinned shut against the rack and air was arriving less frequently to his lungs. The shadows in the room were beginning to swim and swirl around in Disciple's eyes. "Promise me; we're not losing any more men."

"I can't promise anything," Pardus said, letting go of Disciple. "All I can guarantee is that you'll be safe so long as I'm in charge. So are we agreed? I help you, and you help me to keep Jericho's mission on track. What's so hard to understand?"

Disciple fell to his knees, gasping for breath. He tried to pull himself upright with the aid of the shelving units, but Pardus grabbed him by the collar and pulled him to his feet. Pardus dusted off Disciple's fatigues with the hand that was gripping the ka-bar.

"We're going to walk out of here and act like nothing happened.

You're going to follow me onto the boat, and when we leave, you're going to hit that switch and say this outpost must have been booby-trapped; rigged to blow. I'm not going to say a word of what you're letting these men die in vain for, and you're not going to pretend to be a warrior like your brother Shadow. Are we agreed?"

Disciple struggled to see in the darkness. He could faintly detect Pardus's outstretched hand a few inches from his face. Disciple chewed on the inside of his cheek, placing a palm against the miniscule wound on his neck. Before Disciple could make a move, Pardus took his hand and squeezed it in a vice-grip.

"We're agreed," Pardus grunted. "*Alea iacta est*. Let's go."

Disciple remained where he was standing while Pardus opened the steel door. The room became filled with the bloody brilliance of the descending sun, cutting west over the clearing. Disciple could feel Pardus watching him as they walked out of the building. Disciple was beginning to wonder what Pardus knew of the developing situation between Axis Mundi Corporation, El Dorado Expeditionary Freight, and the major world powers contracting them. There was one thing that Disciple wanted to know more than anything.

Was Pardus aware of the other colliders being sabotaged?

"Next stop; the collider on Mount Chrysopoeia," Syd called out.

The tug boat's engine grumbled as the craft pulled away from the pier, spitting water in the wake of its propellers. As the craft turned away from the concrete structure, Andrei came up the stairs from below-decks and jogged to where Zosimus was standing on the bow. Both men were soaked with Josef's blood; the stains on Andrei's clothing were dark and freshly wet, whereas Zosimus's clothes had dried to the texture of starched papyrus.

"Lalo is checking on your comrade, bounty hunter," Andrei said. "The last I saw, he was swapping out Josef's bandages and stitching together what he could. You can go down and see him, if you like."

Zosimus didn't speak as he watched the tropical banks pressing against the hull of the boat. His lips trembled with unspoken words; he had long since been rendered mute by his own fractured mind. The visage of Josef's face flashing in Zosimus's subconscious forced him to fight for his thoughts in the present moment. He had never felt so afraid or so lost, not since the day of his mother's murder. Zosimus turned to face Andrei, his wide eyes twitching with adrenaline, and said, "*Meu irmão*, is he"

A sudden explosion shook the mangrove trees along the riverbank and a roaring gust of windswept fire rushed forth from the glen. Zosimus and Andrei immediately ducked, covering their heads as burning chunks of cement rocketed down and blasted apart across the deck. Syd shouted in surprise and dove to the floor, abandoning the captain's box.

Zosimus rose to his feet and watched as fire began to spread across the once-peaceful glade. The concrete shelter had been obliterated, leaving only a pile of smoldering rubble where it once stood. The dock had been reduced to a greasy, oil-burning miasma of tinder bobbing in the brown river water. Zosimus looked over his shoulder at Pardus and Disciple, both of whom were still standing beside the steering column.

When Pardus noticed the bounty hunter watching him, he shrugged. "Must have been hiding something," Pardus said. "Cowards."

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR– THE NELLIE

The El Dorado Expeditionary Freight tugboat's engine grumbled and coughed as it followed the Akhmim River south through the jungle, towards Mount Chrysopoeia. Pardus maintained a steady hand as he steered the decrepit ship through narrow banks tangled with wooden liana vines and creeping *adenia* ivy. Shaggy breonadia trees fought with monkey pod shrubs for space along the muddy shore. Rows of scarlet tulip trees veiled the jungle's depths with tattered curtains of beard lichen. The interwoven canopy over the river sieved any available moonlight; Pardus was steering the men down a vegetated tunnel as dark as a cavern chamber.

Syd stood at the bow of the ship, directing a mounted fog-light to help guide Pardus around the winding river bends. Clouds of humming mosquitoes swirled through the light, giving the beam a solidified shape as it swept over the water. The river's surface was a smooth slate of obsidian, swirling with the celestial reflection of the fog-light. The drifting shapes of Nile crocodiles sliced through the brackish waves, their eyes glimmering like drowning fireflies. The air was thick with humidity and the buzzing bodies of blood-sucking insects. Zosimus didn't notice the biting tsetse flies and mosquitoes anymore; he had grown used to the company of parasites. Towards the end of the War for Independence, Zosimus had come to the conclusion that the nation he was serving was nothing more than a leech upon his motherland. The Portuguese had been siphoning invaluable resources, manpower, rare minerals, and oil from Angola all the way up to the end of the War. Zosimus was beginning to wonder if he was still in the company of parasites, or if the other men on the boat were truly predators. The only distinction came from how they sought survival... Zosimus was distracted from his thoughts when he heard the door below the captain's box swing open. Andrei came up from the stairwell belowdecks and jogged to Zosimus's side.

"Your comrade is awake," Andrei said. "Go see him, Zosimus."

Zosimus didn't move; he continued to watch the forested banks.

Andrei put a hand on Zosimus's shoulder. "He doesn't have long..."

Zosimus brushed off Andrei's hand and walked towards the door to the belowdecks stairwell. The plank-wood steps creaked and groaned as the bounty hunter struggled to find his footing in the rocking chamber. The only light came from an open doorway to the right; the living quarters. Lalo was silhouetted in the light, wiping his hands with a darkrag. Zosimus's stomach turned when he heard the patter of Josef's blood dripping from the soused cloth.

"Flores," Zosimus said. "How is *meu irmão*?"

"Your *hermano* is unconscious, but he can't speak," Lalo said. "I stitched and glued and stapled together everything I could, but he'll be disfigured for life— if he survives. If you want to talk to him, he can write notes. I haven't been able to get him to communicate much, though. All he's been asking for is to speak withyou."

Zosimus looked past Lalo and saw his partner lying on a table against the back wall of the living quarters. A dim light mounted to the wall over the table bathed Josef in jaundiced light. His facial bandages were fresh; the former head-wrap lay abandoned on the floor. The coagulated blood in the guaze created a shadowy imitationof Josef's mutilated face. Zosimus grimaced in disgust and kicked the open-mouthed mask beneath the table.

Zosimus swallowed dryly. "How is his leg, Lalo?"

"His right femur is broken; open fracture," Lalo said. He pulled a folding chair up to the table for Zosimus. "I set the bone back into place and cleaned the wound, but he's probably going to lose the leg. At the very least, he'll never walk right again. The most we can do is keep giving him water and morphine until he can get flown out to Kuito."

"Thank you, Lalo," Zosimus muttered. "He...he isn't to blame..."

"I know, *hermano*," Lalo said. "Pardus and Syd are responsible."

Zosimus sat down in the folding chair beside the table that Josef was laid upon. He said, "We don't know that for sure, Lalo. I don't doubt that *meu irmão* was looking for loot; it's what got us kicked out of the Portuguese military to begin with. Kinane was clearly lying, but I don't understand why Pardus would lead these men todo such... horrible things. He claimed to have so much wealth with Quad Equitum, working for this man, Solomon Aquino..."

Lalo dropped his rag. "Pardus works for Solomon Aquino?"

"Apparently so," Zosimus said. "Some American businessman."

"Solomon Aquino is the majority shareholder of the Axis Mundi Corporation," Lalo said. "Pardus said Quad Equitum was working for General Jericho. If Pardus told you he's working for Solomon Aquino, that means he's working for Axis Mundi Corporation. I don't think we're after a Portuguese collider, *amigo*. I think we're after a collider that was built by Pardus's employers."

Zosimus stared blankly at Lalo. "What difference does that make?" "Axis Mundi Corporation is a military contractor," Lalo said. "They're a company based out of the United States, but our agents have found their colliders built in almost every country that America's allied with. If Pardus is here with Quad Equitum on behalf of the Axis Mundi Corporation, that means we're cleaning up after one of their colliders, not Portugal. This mission doesn't have anything to do with Angola, and everything to do with covering up America's mistakes overseas." Zosimus held his hand up; Lalo was nearly panting.

"Our agents?" Zosimus said.

Lalo shook his head and started pacing around the room. He turned his back to Zosimus, wiping his hands dry on his stained fatigue jacket. Lalo took the M1911 pistol from his belt and turned around, switching the safety off as he took aim at the bounty hunter. Zosimus immediately rose to his feet with his hands up. Lalo's sweating face shone yellow with the single light blinking over Josef.

"Lower your voice," Lalo whispered. "It'll be our secret, *hermano*."

"Please," Zosimus whispered. "Don't kill *meu irmão*."

"I won't," Lalo said. "If I contact *mi amigos*, we can save him."

"*El Leóns*?" Zosimus asked. "The men from the village?"

"Don't ask questions," Lalo hissed through his teeth. "*Please*."

"Okay," Zosimus mumbled. His hands were beginning to shake.

"We can keep Josef alive," Lalo said, lowering the pistol. "And Doctor Wynn, too. He's a good man, despite his past. We can either take Syd captive or leave him for dead; he's just a pawn in all of this. Pardus will have to die, no matter what. That CIA agent, Disciple, is a coin toss; I don't care if he lives or dies. Do you?"

"No," Zosimus grunted, lowering his hands. "I don't care, either."

"After you talk to Josef, we'll take this ship out from under Pardus and Syd," Lalo said, holstering his pistol. "Syd is still manning the flood light on the front of the ship; I'll position myself behind him and wait for your signal. When you come up from belowdecks, take the first shot you can at Pardus. Aim for his head, throat, chest, anything. Just put the rat *bastardo* down and I'll take care of Syd. He's a goliath, that American, but I'll take his legs out from under him. I don't mind crippling a war criminal."

Zosimus dropped back down into the folding chair. He held his head in his hands and took a deep, shuddering breath. Josef suddenly moaned and started pawing feebly for a pencil that was just out of reach.

"Please, *Suku*," Zosimus prayed beneath his breath. "Let us out of your nightmares. I'm sorry for turning my back on you and *Nyoho Ongongo*. Please, release us from your nightmares..."

Lalo put a hand on Zosimus's shoulder and the bounty hunter

immediately recoiled, unsheathing his kukri machete. Lalo kept one hand raised in compliance while resting the other on the butt of his holstered pistol. He slowly backpedaled from the room as Zosimus lowered the rusted blade.

"Take your time," Lalo whispered. "I'll be waiting for your shot."

Lalo jogged out of the living quarters, up the stairwell to the top deck. Zosimus stared down at Josef's discarded mask on the floor and wiped his eyes dry. Josef's wheezing respirations sounded wet, bubbling with phlegm and sputum. The muggy air within the living quarters was thick with the smell of Josef's soiled pants; urine, blood and shit. Zosimus didn't know how to speak to the faceless man stretched out before him. The face of Zosimus's beheaded mother had long been repressed to a blur within his own mind. Zosimus wondered how long it would take for Josef's face to fade from his memories as well.

Josef's crawling fingers finally found the paper and pencil that Lalo had left on the table. Zosimus heard the pencil scratching against the wooden tabletop and raised his head. He leaned forward to watch as Josef blindly scrawled a message on the parchment. After composing five words, Josef dropped the pencil and fumbled through his breast pocket with a sluggish hand. Zosimus took the note from Josef and peered at it in the dim yellow light.

forgive me irmão im sorry

"I...I know," Zosimus sighed. "I forgive you, *irmão*. What you've done doesn't matter anymore. The people in that village...their *n'ma* has gone away. Where their souls have gone, we'll never know. Maybe you can apologize to them someday, but for now, you don't have to apologize to me. I know you were seeking treasures from our motherland; you weren't the first, and you won't be the last. You were misguided, manipulated by an animal in the guise of a man."

Josef urgently scrawled another note for Zosimus to read. When Josef was finished, his tremulous hand dropped limply onto the table. His other hand was resting on his chest, clutching an object. Zosimus looked from Josef's clenched fist to the sheet of paper and leaned closer to it. Josef's gurgling wheeze filled the creaking chamber as Zosimus held his breath.

please irmão

kill pardus and kinane

"I will," Zosimus muttered. His voice was cracking. "I promise." The pencil scratched across the paper. Zosimus looked at the note.

syds gold for my silence

Josef reached across the table with his left hand and dropped the gold nugget on top of the note. Zosimus took the ore from Josef and squeezed it, burying his nails into the soft rock. He thought that gold would have felt like metal, but it seemed like any ordinary stone. He had only seen raw gold ore once in his life, embedded in the buttress wall behind the waterfall where his mother had been murdered. Zosimus's fingers tightened around the gold and he shoved it into his pocket.

"They will pay," Zosimus muttered. "With blood; not gold." Josef scribbled another message. His wheezing became a hiss.

papa here

Zosimus's eyes widened; Josef's father had been killed by MPLA. "What do you mean?" Zosimus asked. "You can see your father?" Zosimus listened to Josef's waning respirations as the pencil

spoke.

horror

irmão, horror

"No," Zosimus pleaded, grabbing Josef by the shoulders. "Don't go into the light, *irmão*. I can still help you. When Lalo and I kill Pardus, we'll take you to *El Leóns* and get you out of here. You just need to stay with us for the rest of the boat ride, *irmão*. I won't let anything happen to you, I promise. You're the only family I have left."

Josef's body turned still on the table, and he began to snore. Zosimus wiped his eyes and weakly exhaled. He put the note into his pocket and stepped away from his sleeping partner. Zosimus loaded a new magazine into his G3 assault rifle and rose from the folding chair. He stepped out of the living quarters and into the stairwell leading to the upper deck. The song of locust seeped through the timber walls; the only other sound was the groaning of the tugboat's ancient engine. Zosimus raised the G3 assault rifle to his cheek and slowly ascended the squeaking plank steps.

"Working with the communists, bounty hunter?"

A ka-bar flashed through the shadows and planted into the wall beside Zosimus's head. He immediately pulled the G3's trigger as he spun around, drawing a line of fire through the narrow stairwell. The hilt of the kabar cracked into Zosimus's temple and he fell to his knees, dropping the G3 rifle. He put a hand to the side of his head and felt sticky blood on his fingertips; either his own or Josef's, he couldn't tell. The plastic stock of an M16 shattered between Zosimus's shoulders

and he collapsed against the stairs. A pair of armshooked under Zosimus's armpits, hoisting him up the steps.

"I thought we had a deal, *irmão*," Pardus growled.

"You're not my brother," Zosimus panted. "You're an *animal*." "One and the same," Pardus said. "Everything is equal in death."

Zosimus used his elbows to clamp Pardus's arms against his sides and kicked off from the top step. The pair tumbled backwards down the stairs, grunting and barking until they crashed in a heap at the bottom. Zosimus disentangled his limbs and started climbing the stairs on his hands and feet. Pardus sat upright and fired his M16, splintering the steps beneath Zosimus's boots. Zosimus scrambled up the stairwell and dove out through the open door, rolling across the deck to his feet. He immediately withdrew his machete and spun around, facing the stairwell.

"Easy, bounty hunter," Syd called out. "Drop the blade."

Zosimus looked up and saw Syd standing in the captain's box with Lalo at his side. Syd was steering the tugboat with one hand on the wheel, the other hand aiming a .45 magnum revolver to Lalo's head. Disciple was on his knees below them, with his hands over his head and his M16 lying on the ground in front of him. Andrei was kneeling beside the CIA agent, but he was preoccupied with watching the river. Zosimus followed Andrei's line of sight and saw a pair of ethereal green eyes riding the current, towards the tugboat.

Syd fired the revolver into Lalo's foot, and the medic dropped with a scream. Syd hollered down to Zosimus, "I won't ask again, bounty hunter. Pardus knew you were in cahoots with the communist all along. Now do as I say and *drop the blade!*"

Zosimus kept the kukri machete aimed at the stairwell as Pardus stomped up the steps. Lalo howled from the floor of the captain's box, clutching his obliterated foot. Disciple covered his head and laid face-flat on the peeling deck. The boat started to sway on roiling waves as the green eyes hovered closer, carried by the sound of a behemoth's heavy breathing. Andrei was beginning to back away from the railing, stepping between Zosimus and the stairwell door.

"Zosimus, Lalo," Andrei cried out. "Hold on to something!"

Pardus pounced out of the stairwell, his M16 raised.

"Hands up, Zosimus!" Pardus snapped. "Get behind me, Andrei!"

Andrei threw himself on top of Zosimus, flattening the bounty hunter against the floor as Pardus's M16 fired over their heads. The muzzle flare briefly illuminated a leathery snout the size of a kayak spearing through the air towards the tugboat. Zosimus and Andrei screamed from the floor as Pardus glanced to the left, at the hovering eyes rushing towards the craft. An immense body struck the side of the tugboat, causing the craft to rock violently in the water. The

crocodilian head of a gargantuan theropod swung over the boat as Lalo dove out of the captain's box.

"*Doctor Wynn*," Syd shouted. "What the hell is this thing?!"

Andrei balked in horror at the sight of the leviathan rising above the waves. Its body was swathed in algae and dripping moss, the glistening reptilian hide a murky blend of swampy greens and mottled black. The dinosaur had a body similar to that of the Goliath or a tyrannosaurus rex, but with long, muscular arms that hung low to the river's surface. The dinosaur's curved foreclaws sloshed through the water, stirring the dimly lit tide. The crocodilian biped gave a low, rumbling growl that briefly stalled the current.

"It's a *suchomimus*," Andrei said. "He's a piscivore; a fish eater." The boat's propellers growled violently; mired in mud. "Cut the engine!" Pardus snapped, looking at Syd. "Now!"

The river became silent as the rumbling of the boat's engine was cut short. The ship slid back into the river and the current pulled it north, away from the *suchomimus*. The half-submerged theropod snarled deafeningly loud, rattling the leafy archway of branches above the boat. Pardus aimed his M16 at the *suchomimus* and put his finger to the trigger. Andrei jumped in the way, his arms outstretched.

"*Don't*," Andrei said. "Nguyen - comrade, please, let the current- " Pardus shoved Andrei aside and pointed his M16 at the *suchomimus*'s algae-bearded maw. The *suchomimus* squinted at the foglight, shaking its quill-covered head with an irritable growl. A second pair of eyes flickered further down stream, and a lavender-colored female *suchomimus* waded into the river. The female *suchomimus* grunted and ducked away from the tugboat's fog light, trying to make sense of the new adversary invading its nesting site. Andrei recognized the animals' visible confusion and turned to Pardus.

"Please, comrade," Andrei whispered. "Let the current take us."

The men remained quiet as they listened to the waves lapping against the hull of the tugboat. The voluminous breathing of the *suchomimus* filled the watery tunnel of mangroves. The male *suchomimus* lifted its head above the fog light, fading out of sight. Sharp quills covered the back of the theropod's head and neck like a prickly mane, dripping cold river water and slimy gobs of algae. The male *suchomimus*'s eyes glimmered like seraphic emeralds in the darkness as it studied the tugboat, its long snout hanging only a meter above the ship's bow. Zosimus watched as the male *suchomimus* craned its neck over the ship. Clumps of mud and moss fell from the carnivore's wrinkled throat wattle. The *suchomimus*'s talons clattered against the wooden hull of the ship as the beast took the bow of the craft in its embrace. The current pulled the tugboat away from the *suchomimus*; both animals tilted their heads from left to right and looked at each other in

confusion.

“Nobody...move...a *muscle*...” Andrei hissed.

“Sorry, Doctor,” Pardus said. He pulled the trigger of his M16. The *crack* of the gunshot made all of the men flinch. The male suchomimus roared and spread its wide forearms defensively. Andrei opened his mouth to scream as both of the suchomimus charged towards the boat. The leviathans barreled through the water, sluggish in the wake. The beam from the fog light shrunk to a mere speck on the jade underbelly of the male suchomimus as it lunged over the ship. Zosimus latched onto the railing and screamed, “Lalo, Doctor Wynn, hold on!”

The suchomimus crashed into the boat with a bellow and the craft shuddered violently beneath its weight. The boat tea-kettled forward and the stern of the ship rose high above the water. Zosimus’s legs swung down as the boat became perpendicular with the river. Nets, ropes, lanterns, oil drums and wooden shipping crates clattered down the length of the deck and bounced past Zosimus’s head.

Zosimus saw a crate tumbling down towards him and pressed his body against the railing. He bowed his head forward as the crate ricocheted off of the deck over his scalp. The corner of the crate slammed against the base of Zosimus’s spinal cord with the force of a heavy-weight boxer’s fist. Zosimus barked in pain, but held tight to the railing. The male suchomimus roared overhead and a massive taloned paw crashed through the deck above Zosimus. The boat shuddered tumultuously, the wooden planks groaning as they were spread apart by the carnivore’s foot-long claws.

The other men were screaming from various handholds across the boat. Lalo cried out as he plummeted from the ship’s airborne stern to the water below. Zosimus opened his eyes when he heard Andrei screaming his name from the adjacent deck railing. The battered young scientist was mouthing words at Zosimus, but his voice was lost to the roaring of the suchomimus. Zosimus managed to read a singular command on Andrei’s lips.

Jump!

Zosimus watched as Andrei let go of the railing, knifing into the water at the suchomimus’s feet. The carnivore growled as it turned its crocodilian snout to the bubbles frothing around its ankles. There was a banging from the other side of the boat. The suchomimus rotated its lengthy head around and saw Lalo knocking his fist against the tugboat’s hull.

“Over here,” Lalo barked. “Come and get it, ‘gator!”

The male suchomimus prepared to release its grip on the boat, but it was momentarily distracted by a panicked scream from the air-borne captain’s box. Lalo ducked beneath the river’s surface as the

suchomimus turned back to the boat. Zosimus let go of his hand-hold and slid down the length of the ship, splashing heavily into the water below. The submerged fog-light struck Zosimus in the gut, folding the bounty hunter in half as the only breath in his lungs escaped in a shocked gasp. Zosimus's open mouth filled with water and he choked, kicking away from the sunken ship. He swam through the abyss with his arms outstretched to feel his way through the dark.

Zosimus felt thesuchomimus's leathery skin beneath his fingertips and he screamed involuntarily. Another wave of fetid water ran down the bounty hunter's throat. He gagged and kicked to the surface, breaking through the current with a heavy gasp. The current was dragging Zosimus back towards the boat and the body of the male suchomimus. Fire burst from thetugboat's airborne engine, illuminating the suchomimus in infernal light as it reared its arm back to deal another killing blow to the vessel. The boat resembled a Viking funerary pyre, sinking beneath a pair of ravenous dragons.

Zosimus stared across the water's surface as the male suchomimus brought its forelimbs down onto the stern of the ship, forcing it below the waves. Zosimus realized that there was a body burning within the pyre, and he screamed as the undertow wrenched him down.

"Josef!" Zosimus cried out. "*Irmão* "

Zosimus choked as he was dragged beneath the black waters of the undertow, but he didn't fight back. He believed that if it brought him back to the boat, he could find a way inside and rescue Josef before it was too late. Zosimus turned into the current, reaching forward to feel his way through the abyssal hellscape. Something ensnared Zosimus's legs and he yelped in surprise, kicking to free himself. He realized he was being forcibly dragged out of the undertow, away from the suchomimus and the sinking ship.

The roaring of the suchomimus returned to Zosimus's ears with overwhelming clarity as he broke through the surface of the river. He looked up and saw that he was being dragged onto the shore by Lalo. Zosimus fought against Lalo, trying to swim back towards the suchomimus and the rapidly submerging tugboat. Zosimus cried out in desperation as he watched the vessel sink completely beneath the carnivore.

"Let me go!" Zosimus screamed. "I have to get *meu irmão*!"

"Calm down, *hermano*!" Lalo snapped. He dragged Zosimus onto the bank and threw him down into the mud. Zosimus immediately climbed to his feet, but exhaustion brought him back down to his knees. He crawled towards the water like a feral rat, dragging his legs through the reeking mire. Lalo grabbed Zosimus by the shoulders and threw him onto his back, putting a boot on his chest to pin him in place. There was a gaping hole in the top of Lalo's boot from where he

had been shot by Syd; blood oozed steadily from the obscene orifice. “Your *hermano* is gone, *amigo*,” Lalo said. “I can’t afford to lose you too. Andrei, Disciple, Kinane and Pardus are on the opposite shore. We have to figure out what we’re going to do if we’re going to save Doctor Wynn, as well as ourselves, you understand? We have to kill Pardus. We can’t let Josefdie in vain.”

Zosimus stared up at Lalo, trembling and weak. “Josef-I can-he” “He’s *dead*, *hermano*,” Lalo said, staring down into Zosimus’s widening eyes. “He’s *gone*. There was no possible way he could have survived that. You have to let him go, you understand? You have to be brave; you know this. We have to be brave together. Let’s find a place to camp and then in the morning we’ll find my *compañeros*, *El Leóns*. We don’t have to take down Pardus alone.”

Zosimus looked past Lalo’s shadowy figure to the fire-lit shape of the suchomimus downstream. The male suchomimus had relinquished its hold on the boat, and it was directing its attention to the surrounding forest. The verdant eyes of the creature swiveled slowly like ghastly beacons, peering into the darkness beneath the mangroves. The second suchomimus, the female with leathery mauve skin, had returned to her nest on the opposite shore. The male suchomimus waded past the sinking tugboat and nuzzled his mate over the burning, half-submerged captain’s box.

Zosimus stared at the parental dinosaurs, lost for words.

“We have to go, *hermano*,” Lalo said. “Get up. *Move*.”

Zosimus nodded and climbed to his feet, following Lalo into the jungle like a child being guided by their elder. The male suchomimus roared once more, establishing its dominance over the Akhmim River. As Zosimus stumbled after Lalo into the night-time jungle, a singular word cycled relentlessly through his conscious mind. *irmão brother*
ANIMUS INDIVIDUATION PHASE IV THE MAN AS SHAMAN

“The final archetype in Animus development is the enlightened Man as Shaman. By transcending through the Man of Knowledge, the Man as Shaman attains an understanding of oneness with reality, above and below, within and without. Christ consciousness.”

– Dr. Bruno Moreno

“The soul demands your folly, not your wisdom.”

– Carl G. Jung

“Today I am dirty, but tomorrow I’ll be dirt.”

– Carl Panzram

“All external communications have been wiped out...the blast of EMP’s have rendered most of the world mute and alone. I am afraid there is no hope left, at this beginning of a new era.”

– Captain Bruno Moreno

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE– THE SHADOW

On the opposite riverbank from where Lalo and Zosimus had escaped, Andrei Wynn was clinging to the water-lying ivies that tangled the muddy shore. Andrei’s legs bobbed limply in the river’s dragging tide; the icy mountain water made his muscles tighten into a state of pseudo-rigor mortis. He buried his fingers into the marshy clay and started crawling up the embankment. Andrei shuddered as he heard the suchomimus roaring to one another from beyond a bend in the river. The mother had returned to their nest while the father continued to patrol the tree-line. The only light in the pitch-black night were the oil-fed flames licking up around the sunken tugboat. All that visibly remained of the craft was the captain’s box, half-submerged in the brackish water.

Andrei rolled onto his back on the shore and sat upright, shivering violently beneath his soaked khaki fatigues. He was covered in fetid mud and clay; leeches shined like black boils on his forearms. Andrei ignored the parasites throbbing on his arms and looked downstream, where the father suchomimus was pacing past overhanging lala palms and *sjambok* pod trees. Andrei wiped his glasses clean to get a better look at the crocodilian theropod. He wasn’t sure if the predator was simply protecting its territory, or if was actively hunting down the survivors of the attack. Either possibility was a risk that Andrei wasn’t willing to take. He distantly hoped that he would find Lalo or Zosimus on the opposite shore; he didn’t care about finding the others.

“Doctor Wynn, over here!”

Andrei groaned and looked over his shoulder when he heard Disciple’s voice. The CIA agent was further uphill, half-hidden amongst the undergrowth between a pair of tulip trees. Andrei slowly stood up and staggered through the ivy towards Disciple. He glanced back and forth as he walked; he didn’t see either Syd or Pardus. The male suchomimus was across the river, sniffing around the root balls of mangrove trees. Andrei knew the animal wasn’t defending its territory anymore; it was on the hunt.

“We have to get out of here,” Disciple said, pulling Andrei beneath the cover of the undergrowth. He took out a small metal box from his pocket and held it out for Andrei to see. There was a single green bulb

on the face of the device, with a keypad beneath it. Disciple said, "This device feeds information to a satellite that links to our back-up forces in Kuito. The code is six- six- six- five. If we enter that, Vulture Squad will fly in and get us out of here. We weren't supposed to activate it until we found the collider- "

Andrei grabbed Disciple by the throat and back-handed his face. "*Cyka blyat!* You had a way out the entire time, you rat?!" "I had orders from General Jericho!" Disciple cried. "Get off!"

Andrei shoved Disciple back beneath the foliage and turned to watch the riverbank. The male suchomimus was no longer visible; Andrei could hear the female purring from her nest beyond the river bend. Andrei decided to cross the stream and search for Lalo and Zosimus; anything would be better than being stuck with the frightened CIA agent. Disciple put the tracking device into his pocket and jumped to his feet, stumbling after Andrei.

"We have to get to the collider," Disciple said. "We can evac out-"

Gunshots rang out from upriver, and a muzzle flash strobed in the darkness. Bullets thudded into the soil around Andrei's feet and he dove away. Disciple dropped into a prone position as another stream of lead cut through the mosquitoes hovering overhead. Andrei scrambled on his belly down the muddy bank, towards the ivy that was hanging into the current. Disciple started crawling after him, but Andrei took a rock and heaved it at the CIA agent. The rock struck Disciple's shoulder and he yelped in pain. Andrei grabbed the ivy and slid down soundlessly into the water.

Pardus came running down the bank with his M16 raised. He stumbled over to Disciple and fired a round into each of the CIA agent's knee caps. Disciple shrieked and writhed through the mud, grasping at his mangled legs. Pardus walked over and put a boot onto the top of Disciple's head, pushing his face into the soil. Pardus raised his M16 and fired a round through the palms of Disciple's hands. Andrei cringed in the water as the CIA agent screeched from his mock-stigmata wounds.

"Hello, Mr. Shinoda," Pardus whispered. "Where is Dr. Wynn?" "*Nguyen, please,*" Disciple wailed. "*Jesus, stop! Don't kill me!*" Pardus unsheathed his ka-bar and lowered it to the side of

Disciple's head. Disciple howled and wriggled in the mud as Pardus neatly sliced the blade through the top of his ear. Pardus pinched the

upper earlobe between his thumb and index finger and ripped the entire ear away from Disciple's head. Disciple's screams began to fray apart as his vocal chords gave out. Pardus tossed the severed ear at Syd as Disciple hyperventilated on the ground between them. Syd dropped his M60 and recoiled in disgust while Pardus laughed.

"Jesus, Pardus," Syd said. "That's fucking gross."

"I read your file," Pardus said. "Add it to your trophy necklace." "That was one time," Syd muttered, picking up his M60. Pardus took the tracking beacon from Disciple and put it into his

breast pocket. He placed the edge of the kabar on top of Disciple's remaining ear and whispered, "Where's Doctor Wynn, Shinoda? I had orders to take him alive. If he ends up getting eaten or killed because you didn't tell me where he went, I'm going to come back and peel your face off of your skull. I'll leave you for the dinosaurs, looking like that Portuguese bounty hunter, Josef."

"Why?" Disciple choked. "Why, god? Why are you doing this?" "There is no god," Pardus whispered. "Only Ordo Ouroboros." "Ordo Ouroboros?" Disciple repeated. "They're-they're not real-" Pardus lifted his finger; the pendant dangled from his ka-bar. "The Aeon of Ouroboros has begun, Disciple," Pardus said.

"Why are you here?" Disciple wheezed. "Why are you doing this?" "Peace on earth," Pardus drawled. "By any sacrificenecessary." Pardus dragged the kabar through Disciple's remaining ear,

shearing it off from the side of his head. Disciple screamed, but all that came out was a grating squeal. Syd looked away as Pardus threw the severed ear over his shoulder. Pardus pressed his boot against the back of Disciple's head and stood upright, glancing up and down the river bank for the missing Russian scientist.

"Shinoda's heard enough," Pardus said, looking back at Syd. "I don't see any reason to give him the mercy of death."

"Ain't nobody coming for him, neither," Syd grunted. "Let's go." Pardus wasn't listening; his eyes had settled upon a wide streak in the mud leading towards the thickets along the river bank. Pardus sheathed the bloody ka-bar and started walking down the embankment. He raised a single hand and motioned for Syd to follow, then took his M16 from its shoulder sling. Pardus studied the water's edge, looking for any ripples in the water from stationary objects disrupting the current. He saw a dark stain in the mud, glittering with the reflection of an oil fire. Pardus touched his finger to the smeared

fluid and tasted it. He smiled when he recognized the taste of human blood.

"Come on out, Andrei," Pardus yelled. "Ordo Ouroboros awaits." Andrei turned still in the water at the mention of Ordo Ouroboros. He never thought they would find him; the clandestine nature of Stalker Force and the CIA had effectively scrubbed Andrei's past from existence. The only thing he was sure of was that he would be tortured or executed for turning his back on Ordo Ouroboros if they ever found him. Andrei could only think of one member of the cult that would be willing to spend decades tracking him down from Germany to Russia, to Vietnam and finally Angola.

Andrei yelped in pain as he was hoisted out of the water by his hair. "Mr. Aquinosends his regards," Pardus hissed. "*Traitor.*"

Andrei grunted as he was thrown down next to Disciple.

"I'm not allowed to kill you," Pardus said. "But I can cripple you."

Syd raised his hand. "I won't let you hurt Doctor Wynn, Pardus..."

Andrei kicked Pardus's legs out from underneath of him and scrambled away, back down the riverbank. Pardus cursed beneath his breath and bolted upright, aiming his M16 at Andrei's fleeing form. Andrei cried out in fear as bullets pounded the clay around his feet. He threw himself face-down and started clawing through the ivy in a rabid frenzy. Pardus and Syd were running halfway down the riverbank when Andrei dropped into the water, kicking towards the sunken tugboat. Pardus fired his M16 at Andrei's swimming body, but Syd shoved the barrel away.

"Hold your fire, Pardus," Syd said. "I ain't lettin' you kill Andrei!"

Pardus jerked his rifle away with a scowl and looked back to river; Andrei was nowhere to be seen. The male suchomimus was pounding its feet along the shoreline, growling vehemently as it turned its narrow, toothy snout in Pardus's direction. The carnivore waded into the rolling waves and easily crossed the river to their side of the shore. Pardus and Syd doubledback from the approaching carnivore, stepping over Disciple's crippled body. Disciple groaned and squirmed on the blanket of ivy as the male suchomimus stomped up the embankment, its long jaws hanging low to the earth.

"Find and kill Flores," Pardus grunted. "Subdue the bounty hunter."

"What about Doctor Wynn?" Syd said.

"I'll find him," Pardus said. "Cowards can run, but they can't hide."

Pardus grinned as he watched the male suchomimus snort around the CIA agent's prone body. Disciple tried to crawl away, but his shattered kneecaps and mangled hands were useless. The suchomimus gently gripped Disciple's neck between its conical teeth and lifted him into the air. The suchomimus used its muscular forearms to hold Disciple's body in place, but its foot-long talons quickly sank through his

ribcage. Pardus started to laugh when he heard Disciple's death rattle; he could tell by the wet gagging sounds that the CIA agent's lungs had filled with blood.

"There's another village down river," Pardus said. "Find me there." Disciple was carried away as Pardus and Syd escaped into the night.

In the jungles to the west, Zosimus and Lalo had found shelter in a small cave that was positioned in the face of a vine-covered buttress. The small stone recess was dry, and the entrance was too narrow for any of the larger carnivorous dinosaurs to enter. Zosimus built a campfire in the cave mouth with dry brush as Lalo tended to his own gunshot wound. Lalo drank half a pint of rum and injected several morphine syrettes into his foot before working to remove the .45 bullet. He knew the foot would have to be amputated as soon as he reached an infirmary; it only needed to survive long enough to carry him to *El Leóns*.

Lalo was sweating, shining like a gilded idol in the firelight as he pried the .45 from the bottom of his foot. He bit down on a strip of leather and growled as the tweezers probed the frayed edges of the fleshy pocket. Zosimus kept his distance as the medic worked. Both men were unarmed; their only weapons were Zosimus's machete and Lalo's own dagger. The agonized noises that intermittently came from Lalo kept Zosimus's mind in the present. The bounty hunter was almost grateful for it, for the sake of not having to think about Josef.

Irmão.

A singular word echoed through Zosimus's mind with a voice that rose from the shadowy depths of a merciless river. The note that Josef had written had nearly liquefied in Zosimus's quivering hand. Zosimus's eyes traced the word in a constant loop, jittering from left to right and back again. Whatever meaning that had been left in the word was suddenly lost on Zosimus. The scrawled letters may as well have been hieroglyphics in the mind of the psychologically broken bounty hunter.

Brother.

Any brothers that Zosimus had ever known were all gone. Zosimus had often dreamt of reclaiming his older brother from a primitive life with the *Onjoi* tribe, of bringing him to Silva Porto to serve by his side in the Portuguese military. After serving with Josef in the Portuguese *Caçadores Especiais*, Zosimus no longer believed the civilized world was any better than the dark heart of Angola. As far as Zosimus was concerned, his longlost *Onjoi* brother was just as well fending off leopards in the brush than dealing with the rigors of a world beset by war. The only other brother Zosimus had ever known was buried

beneath several tons of steel and silt at the bottom of the Akhmim River.

Irmão.

Zosimus curled his fingers around the soiled shred of paper and touched his fist to his forehead. He snapped the lighter shut and dropped it without thinking, immediately putting the empty hand over the back of his head. Zosimus wrapped his fingers around the crown of his skull and groaned. No tears emerged from the corners of his eyes; only a pitiful whimper escaped his clamped lips.

“Offer a prayer to whatever god you believe in, *hermano*.”

Zosimus looked over his shoulder at Lalo. The Cuban medic was sprawled out with his bandaged foot elevated on a stone. He had one hand under his head, while the other hand held the flask of rum. It was nearly empty, but Lalo passed it to Zosimus anyway. The bounty hunter accepted the flask with a solemn nod.

Lalo said, “If you ever talked to Molnar, he would have told you that there is a God. He believed that this higher power could see through the eyes of all living things. He was a strange one, that Molnar. I’m going to miss him the most, even more than Captain Wise or Benny.” Zosimus took a long pull from the flask and grimaced, savoring the liquor’s biting heat. He leaned back against the cave wall and passed the flask back to Lalo.

“I don’t think Molnar was a bad man,” Zosimus said. “I don’t think anybody on your team was...except for Syd. But not your Captain, nor the rookie or Doctor Wynn. I don’t think you’re bad, either. I don’t understand this war your men have been fighting, and I don’t understand my place in it. Just don’t aim a weapon at me again, *irmão*.”

Lalo took a swig from the flask. “I am unarmed, *amigo*. No guns.”

Zosimus narrowed his eyes at a nearby ibogatee. “*Sim, irmão*.”

“I had no intentions to be here this long,” Lalo said, raising the flask to his lips. The morphine and alcohol were doubly diluting his senses, but he needed the combination to keep the pain of his freshly-stitched gunshot wound at bay. “I was going to rejoin my *compañeros* on our first night here, after Captain Wise died, but I didn’t want to turn my back on Stalker Force. I believed in them; I trusted them. They were my *hermanos* for four years. And now...only the Russian and the murderer remain...”

Zosimus wasn’t paying attention; he was walking to the iboga tree.

“What are you looking at, *hermano*?” Lalo asked.

“Quiet,” Zosimus said over his shoulder. “You’re drunk and high.” “I’d better be,” Lalo grunted. “*Maldito derecho*.”

Zosimus stood at the base of a thirty foot high iboga tree. The campfire flames illuminated the tear-drop shaped orange fruit hanging

from its spindly branches. Zosimus recognized the odd perfume of the tree; the musky incense wafting from its chapped bark. He remembered following his brother in the *Onjoi* tribe on a long journey towards a similar tree after their mother had died.

Zosimus had a clear mental vision of the memory; it had only been days before he fled to join the Portuguese military in Silva Porto. Zosimus's brother had led him to an identical iboga tree to partake in the harvest of ibogaine powder. Zosimus put a hand to the worn surface of the ibogatree's thin trunk and took a deep breath, trying to concentrate on the memory. His eyes climbed to the fire-lit branches and he saw the shadows of *chacma* baboons shifting on the upper boughs. Zosimus heard the voice of his brother on that long-lost night, echoing the words their father had preached as the *sekulu ocinibaiida*. *Don't be afraid, Zosimus. Move through your fear.*

Zosimus fell to his knees before the tree.

"*Iboga*," Zosimus whispered, withdrawing his machete. "It's time."

"*Iboga*?" Lalo repeated. "*Qué?*"

Zosimus reached under his shirt collar and pulled out a leopardskin pouch threaded on a rawhide string. He held the pouch open and used the kukri machete to scrape the iboga tree's bark into it. The leopard skin of the pouch had been taken from the same animal that Zosimus had blamed for his mother's death. It was meant for carrying the ibogaine powder he would have taken on his sixteenth birthday, to become a man in the *Onjoi* tribe. He could feel the adrenaline returning to his tired body as he smelled the pungent bark.

"My people had a rite of passage," Zosimus said to Lalo. "*Olutanu Suku Onjoi*— the Trials of *Suku*'s Dreams. I never followed through with it. If I am to die in the heart of my motherland, in the heart of *Nyoho Ongongo*, I will die with the knowledge my father tried to guide me to. This bark, the iboga; my father said it is the window to see through the eyes of our god, *Suku*. Seeing into that which is beyond death, what people call the 'afterlife'. I was afraid of experiencing it, back when I was a child and afraid of death. I am a man now, and I must pay the toll for my manhood. I must embrace death if I am to accept my own."

"I'm Catholic," Lalo drawled, raising his flask. "Amen, *padre*."

Zosimus filled the leopard skin pouch with iboga powder and tucked it under his shirt. He laid back down across the fire from Lalo, his arms cushioning his head against the cave floor. Zosimus felt his consciousness slipping away as he listened to the whispering flames. Exhaustion quickly subdued the bounty hunter's tired anxieties, and his mind receded to the dark realm of dreams and nightmares. Lalo fell asleep a minute later, the empty flask still in his hand. They never noticed the pair of eyes that were watching them from beyond the

iboga tree.

The hissing embers in the fire pit silenced Syd's footsteps. CHAPTER TWENTY SIX- PSYCHIC DEATH

The iboga tree glowed golden in the brilliant light of dawn. Syd Kinane kept his ka-bar tight between his chipped teeth as he tied the last knot on Zosimus's restraints. Lalo Flores and the bounty hunter had both slept like the dead while Syd bound their wrists and ankles. He took the leopard-skin pouch from Zosimus's throat and checked its contents. Syd wasn't sure of what Pardus truly wanted with the Ovimbundu man, nor did he care. He planned to leave Zosimus in the cave for Pardus to retrieve later...that is, if a dinosaur didn't take the bounty hunter first.

Syd had no stakes in Pardus's operation; he only cared about leaving Angola alive, and working with Pardus seemed like his only chance at survival. He didn't bother questioning Pardus's claims about Lalo being a double agent, as it was easier to remain ignorant than to go against orders. Syd had his gold from the MPLA village, and he was ready to go AWOL from the military entirely.

Syd had decided to skip out on Pardus at the first sign of civilization. He had also considered killing Pardus to take his share of gold as well. He wasn't sure if Pardus had actually taken any gold from the village, but Syd had always been the type to shoot first and leave any questions unanswered. Syd's past in Tiger Force had come to define his present and future with this twisted modus operandi.

In truth, Syd had never felt any remorse when it came to ending the lives of others. The only reason he had ever joined Stalker Force in favor of returning to Tiger Force was to avoid culpability with their past transgressions. If the rest of Tiger Force thought Syd was still missing in action or dead, they wouldn't have any reason to reveal his participation in their prior war crimes. Syd had learned from his perpetual nightmares that the past couldn't be erased; but he could rewrite it. With his cache of gold and the rest of Stalker Force considered KIA in Angola, Syd could finally be reborn as a truly free man. All it would take is a little bit more bloodletting.

Syd took the blade from his teeth and prepared his sacrifice.

Zosimus was awoken by the sound of a gurgling baby. Zosimus opened his eyes and winced, blinded by the morning sunlight clawing at his corneas. Zosimus blinked and groaned where he lay, too sore to move. His spinal cord felt like it had been crumpled in the hands of a goliath. A migraine was swelling within his skull; pressure built against the backs of his eyes. When Zosimus's vision finally cleared, he found himself looking up into the canopy of the iboga tree. He stared at the pale branches overhead, wooden veins curling through a

vaulted ceiling. The sunlight that bore through the canopy made the tree's orange fruit glow like garlands of fire. Zosimus embraced the momentary semblance of peace, grateful to escape the nightmares that had plagued his sleep.

The gurgling of the baby gave way to a rasping choke.

It was then that Zosimus noticed his afghan scarf was wrapped around his mouth. Zosimus tried to sit upright and found that he couldn't; his hands had been bound behind his back. Zosimus began to panic as he fought against his binds, grunting as the gnarled rope bit into his wrists. He attempted to move his legs, but his ankles had been bound as well. Zosimus went still when he heard the familiar sound of a blade slipping through wet musculature tissue. Zosimus turned his head to the left and saw Lalo's bloodshot eyes pleading to him from across the smoldering fire pit.

Syd was straddling Lalo's chest, slowly sawing his ka-bar blade through the Cuban's throat. Torrents of blood drained down Lalo's neck, pooling upon the stone floor beneath his head. Syd kept his left hand tight around Lalo's throat, just beneath his jaw, to keep him from making any noise. Zosimus could feel Lalo's agonized eyes cutting through his core. Syd continued to drag the serrated edge of his ka-bar back and forth, back and forth, down to the vertebrae in Lalo's neck. Syd snapped the blade through Lalo's cervical spine with a moist, sucking *pop*. Zosimus flinched as Lalo's wet gurgling ceased. Syd mechanically turned his head to face Zosimus. Syd's eyes were blank; beads of sweat dripped down his granite features. Zosimus fought to break free of the ropes binding his limbs, but he could do little more than writhe across the cave floor. Zosimus growled through the afghan scarf tied over his mouth as Syd knelt in the sand beside him.

Syd exhaled slowly and lowered his ka-bar, allowing the blade to touch the ground an inch from Zosimus's head. Syd wiped his thumbs around his eyes, ringing his orbital sockets with streaks of Lalo's blood. Zosimus spasmed on the cave floor, wriggling towards Lalo's corpse while growling with effort. Syd kept his eyes on the crawling bounty hunter as he withdrew the leopard-skin pouch of iboga from his breast pocket. When Zosimus saw the ceremonial bag, he began to thrash more violently against his binds.

"Don't worry I'm not going to hurt you," Syd said. His words were empty; devoid of any life or emotion. "Pardus told me that Flores was a double-agent working for the Cubans here all along - those guys we saw back in Panopolis; *El Leóns*. It was all Flores's fault that everything turned out the way it did. If it weren't for him, none of this would have happened. I had to make things right."

Syd reached down and pulled the scarf off of Zosimus's mouth.

"*Get away from me,*" Zosimus snapped. "I'll fucking kill you!"

"I was told I'm not allowed to hurt you," Syd whispered. "But I heard what you said about this stuff, and it seems right for putting you under. Can't have you getting in the way of the mission. No hard feelings, bounty hunter. Pardus will come lookin' for ya' later. I'm not sure what he wants with some worthless bastard like you."

"You're psychotic," Zosimus barked. "You're-"

Sydpawed Zosimus's lower jaw open and poured the pouch of powdered iboga down the bounty hunter's esophagus. Zosimus choked and coughed as the powerful hallucinogenic carved a fiery path to his gut. The iboga tasted bitter and pungent, like gunpowder that had been steeped in a sour carcass. Syd held Zosimus's mouth shut until the bounty hunter had swallowed all of the powder. The iboga took effect instantly, immediately blurring the world in Zosimus's eyes. He stared through rapidly dilating pupils as Syd's expressionless face transmuted into a gelatinous mask of liquid, undulating flesh.

Zosimus grunted, unable to speak through his gnashing teeth.

"I don't envy you," Syd whispered. "Pardus wants you to suffer."

Zosimus choked and stammered in incoherent strings of the Umbundu language as he stared at Syd. From Zosimus's perspective, Syd's broad shoulders were bubbling and rippling as though insects were crawling beneath his skin. The curled ends of Syd's handlebar moustache became the squirming legs of centipedes. Syd's facial features sank within the putty of his face and reemerged; rearranged; submerged again, and reemerged in new patterns. Zosimus vomited and rolled across the cave floor as Syd withdrew Xavier's blood-stained walkie-talkie.

"I did it, Pardus," Syd whispered into the walkie-talkie. His words were dissonant, layered in hundreds of echoing tones that filled the space in Zosimus's skull. "Yeah, the African won't be getting in the way...I killed the Cuban...I'm coming to help...we're going to make everything right..."

Zosimus writhed on the ground as the open air of the clearing filled with a hallucinatory cloud of blood-red smoke. Syd's silhouetted figure dissipated within the vermillion haze. A tone of indescribable resonance rose within Zosimus's head; he knew the sound was coming from within his mind, not outside of it. He could feel the vibrations of the droning hum trembling throughout his entire body. Time began to slow as the discordant drone consumed Zosimus's conscious mind.

Zosimus cried out involuntarily, trying to beg to Syd; for Lalo; for anybody left. He was beginning to lose control over his physical body. He felt himself rising from his own flesh like shapeless smoke, carried by unseen hands, up into the bloody fog that filled the clearing. He realized without thought that he was no longer anchored to his own body. The bounty hunter's consciousness was rising up towards the

canopy, drifting towards a black hole high above the clouds, where he thought the sun should be...

Zosimus looked down and saw that he was floating formlessly above his own body, suspended within the hallucinatory scarlet fog. Without a way to measure time, he felt as though he had been floating for what could have been an eternity. The only thing that alerted him to his own existence was the distant beating of his physical heart. With each contraction of his abandoned organ, the fog would burn like fire. The pain of immolation subsumed Zosimus's perception of reality.

Zosimus believed he was screaming, but he had neither a mouth nor a voice. Were he able to, he would plead to *Suku* and *Nyoho Ongongo*; to his mother and father; to Josef or any remaining spirit that could guide him back to his body. Reality became an illusion; Zosimus could no longer find his own thoughts within the hellish red haze.

A silent procession of shadows sharpened into focus around Zosimus's bodiless conscious. He was dimly aware of men surrounding his physical body on the ground. Sharpened spear-tips traced Zosimus's skin and the bloody clouds of the void burned with infernal heat.

Zosimus felt himself being burned alive, his shapeless mind immolated within the psychical crucible. Zosimus vomited and his conscious mind snapped back into his body as if they had been tethered together by a spectral cord.

Zosimus's eyes flashed open and he saw several silhouetted men surrounding him, their wooden spears aimed inches away from his throat. The physical forms of the silhouettes were comprised of broiling, ink-black smoke that crackled with fractal veins of white lightning. The dark apparitions bobbed and weaved around Zosimus's body, dematerializing and ossifying within the bloody smoke.

Zosimus's lips jerked spasmodically. "S - su - ku - plea- se"

The shadows didn't speak as they watched the bounty hunter.

Electricity crackled throughout Zosimus's nervous system. With a *thump* of his heart, he was propelled from his physical body and into the open air. The burning void eradicated his intangible mind, searing through the space of his free-floating consciousness. The body that Zosimus had abandoned screamed involuntarily from the ground. His howling screams echoed into an infinite delay, layering one voice into a chorus of hundreds. Zosimus's conscious mind was pulled apart seam by seam, and every crack in his being was filled by rapacious flames until nothing was left.

Zosimus's conscious mind evaporated within the fire.

Andrei Wynn had spent the entire night searching for Zosimus and Lalo along the banks of the Akhmim River until he heard screams coming from the west. Andrei ran through the rows of tulip and

muchesa trees without a clue as to what he would do if Syd or Pardus had reached the missing men first. Andrei was completely unarmed, with broken glasses inhibiting his vision and soaking wet clothes weighing him down. The rising humidity choked him; he hadn't eaten since the night of the village attack, and his limbs were losing strength. Andrei heard Syd's voice from further uphill and started climbing through the cloistered rhododendron and thorn brush.

A heavy body was breaking through the foliage, climbing down the hill towards Andrei. He flattened his body beneath the undergrowth and watched as Syd came stumbling past, a blood-dripping ka-bar in hand. Andrei felt his heart seize when a drop tapped a frond inches from his face. He waited until Syd's footsteps through the forest were no longer audible before he resumed his up-hill hike. Andrei didn't know what to think of Pardus's accusations against Lalo, but he didn't care, either. He trusted Lalo and Zosimus with his life. If Pardus or Syd got to Andrei first, they might kill him before they could even make it back to Kuito.

Andrei would rather die than be returned to Ordo Ouroboros. When Andrei edged towards the cave in the face of the buttress, the first thing he was aware of was the sound of vomit splashing, and somebody moaning. Andrei pushed through webs of cassava vine and stumbled into the arid glade at the base of the buttress. He saw Lalo's nearly-beheaded corpse lying on the ground and immediately recoiled, covering his mouth with his hands. Andrei moaned through his fingers as his mind rapidly internalized the image of Lalo's mutilated body. Andrei heard the clatter of spears knocking against shields and he looked up, his wide eyes open and unblinking.

Several indigenous Ovimbundu Angolans dressed in red berrystained loincloths were standing around the Zosimus's bound body at the mouth of the cave. The oldest of the tribe, an Ovimbundu man with a missing right forearm, was kneeling beside the writhing bounty hunter. The man with the missing arm was wearing the pelt of a utahraptor, but it was a subtype unfamiliar to Andrei. The feathers on the cloak were a blend of shimmering greens and blues, with eye-mimicking spots around the maned throat and scalped head. Zosimus threw up violently and curled into a ball on his side as the cloaked Ovimbundu man muttered words in the Umbundu language.

"*Onjila ko Suku,*" the Ovimbundu man said. "*Owusa, omana.*" Andrei raised his hands as the *Onjoi* warriors surrounded him. "Are you talking to me," Andrei croaked. "Or your friends?" The one-armed shaman looked up into Andrei's bloodshot eyes. "I said, this man has taken the road to *Suku*. He must rest."

One of the Ovimbundu men struck Andrei in the side of his head with

the haft of a spear. Andrei grunted and hit the dirt, out-cold. The one-armed shaman motioned for two of the *Onjoi* warriors to carry the Russian, and for two others to carry Zosimus's spasming body. The pair of Ovimbundu men carried Zosimus face-down, so he wouldn't choke on his own vomit. The bounty hunter chattered and yelped like a frightened baboon between bouts of violent retching. The one-armed shaman held his spear high and led his hunting party downhill through the jungle, towards their village further south along the golden Akhmim River.

The conscious mind of Zosimus Kaikara was lost to the void.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN– TRANSCENDANT FUNCTION

Three hours under the influence of iboga felt like three decades.

The conscious mind that once inhabited the body of Zosimus Kaikara was rocketing through a tunnel of blazing hot embers. He was being propelled by a force that defied comprehension, fired like a bullet into the depths of space beyond the material plane. He could feel himself burning alive from within, immolated like a meteor hurtling within the deep black space within his own body. An endless resonant drone echoed throughout what remained of Zosimus's mind as his sense of self flaked away like ashes in the wind.

Zosimus flew through split-second snapshots of his own life like a spectator hurtling through a museum dedicated to his nightmares. He flowed as a screaming cloud through the Ovimbundu villages he had raided with Josef and the Portuguese *Caçadores Especiais*. The severed heads of native Ovimbundu screamed from where they were mounted on pikes, left to mark the burning trail that Zosimus and Josef's squadron had carved through the Angolan countryside. The faces of the beheaded Ovimbundu howled and contorted in agony as Zosimus's bodiless mind soared past.

Zosimus hallucinated without tangible thoughts; only perception.

With a single electrifying beat of his heart, Zosimus was incinerated and his mind was reassembled inside of a brothel in South Africa.

Carnal light seeped from every shadow in the smoke effused room.

Writhing, naked refugee women were wriggling across the mildewed floor like severed serpent tails. Arachnids sprouted from their festering pubic cobwebs as they grasped at Zosimus's bodiless form with talons dipped in dripping scarlet gloss. The wraiths screeched for the bounty hunter in animal imitations of the Umbundu language, begging Zosimus to save their children from Holden Roberto, Jonas Savimbi and the other warlords of Angola. Josef Gustavo's astral face howled with laughter as the hissing Ovimbundu women slithered over his shadowy form.

"*Meu irmão* is just scared, ladies," Josef said. "He is but a *baboon*."

Zosimus's heart contracted and his free-floating consciousness was

cremated. The agony of searing flames that filled Zosimus's head gave way to a momentary ecstasy; cool air settling upon his sweating skin. Zosimus's conscious mind fought for substance, for a handhold in physical reality. There were sounds emanating from the space beyond the eternal fire. A voice, dissonant and echoing, drew Zosimus through the inferno and into his own body.

Zosimus threw his head back and howled in pain, tears streaming down his filthy face. He shrieked as he felt burning coals inching agonizingly slowly through his veins, one blood cell at a time. Zosimus opened his eyes, panting and sobbing, and saw that he was in a timber longhouse. The ebonywood-log walls appeared to be breathing, expanding and contracting around him. Zosimus went limp and his head hung forward. Zosimus's wrists were bound to a pole above his head, to keep him standing upright on the packed dirt floor.

Zosimus looked down and saw the compacted sand, roiling and undulating like water beneath his bare feet. The hallucinatory red fog that had preceded his out-of-body experience filled the air of the timber longhouse. Zosimus could scarcely make out the shape of an apparition sifting through the scarlet cloud. The long snout of a utahraptor emerged from the bloody fog, the feathers on its mane shimmering iridescent emerald and sapphire.

Zosimus watched as the face of an Ovimbundu man rose from beneath the utahraptor's upper jaw. The utahraptor's flayed snout rested over the onearmed shaman's forehead like a hood. The shaman's bare torso and arms were embroidered with threads of golden light. Zosimus stared blindly into the eyes of the shaman; they seemed to burn with the heat of the African sun. The utahraptor's resplendent pelt swirled around the shaman's body as a shimmering veil of green and blue mist.

Zosimus tried to speak, to beg with the stranger. His lower jaw bounced weakly. A serpent roiled through his guts, climbing up his digestive tract with the heat of astringent acid. Zosimus groaned and the serpent emerged from his jaws as a stream of foul vomit, splattering the floor between his bowed legs. The force of the purge flooded Zosimus's body with daggering pain and he felt as though he were drifting free from his body, out through the pores of his skin, dissipating into the open air.

The shaman put a hand over Zosimus's forehead, and the heat that filled the room intensified. Zosimus howled as his conscious mind slipped out of his body, through the windows of his pupils. The shaman whispered the Umbundu words, '*lua ceci sumba; tambulaSuku's ocili*' as the bounty hunter spasmed where he hung limp from the pole. Zosimus had heard the same Umbundu words from his father, while guiding his older brother through the ritual of *Olutanu Suku Onjoi*. Zosimus believed he could hear his father's voice echoing through his mind as his reality was engulfed in flames.

Fight this fear; takeSuku's truth.

There was nothing.

No fire - no heat - no pain.

Only light.

The infinite light of the void faded away to reveal a material world

within Zosimus's hallucinating mind. Zosimus's consciousness was suspended in the center of a celestial sky above an arid savanna. He was one with the sun, feeding light and heat to the pallid grasslands below. Zosimus stared down at a plateau of shimmering white grass threaded with the cindered skeletons of humans and baboons. Zosimus observed the plateau without ego; without thoughts to filter the vision. He perceived his surroundings like an animal controlled by adrenaline; thoughtless; purely reactive and intuitive.

Zosimus noticed that a male lion and a leopard were facing off in the center of the savanna below. The lion's mate and their two young cubs were cowering beneath an acacia tree. A colony of baboons were squealing and chattering in the highest boughs of the acacia canopy, shaking the branches in an attempt to ward off the felines. Zosimus could feel their audible terror coursing through the empty space within his mind.

Zosimus watched as the lion paced across the ground in front of the leopard. He could sense the aridity of the environment; a drought had taken hold of the landscape of Zosimus's dreams. Zosimus noticed the carcass of a wildebeest lying between the felines, and immediately understood the stakes of the conflict. The lion was staking out the dead wildebeest for his family; the leopard was attempting to steal the carcass from the young alpha. The lion and the leopard were of even build and size; it was impossible to determine which one would survive the fight.

The lion pounced forward, planting its claws into the hide of the wildebeest carcass. Zosimus watched as the leopard shrank back, arching its spine in preparation to pounce. The lion spread its jaws in a mighty roar that cascaded like fire through the open air of the savanna. Zosimus felt himself being wrenched down by gravity, careening towards the earth. There was a flash of light, then darkness. When Zosimus blinked and opened his eyes, he saw the lion staring back at him.

Zosimus yowled as he recoiled from the lion. He looked down at his body and saw that he possessed the hairy torso, limbs and tail of a baboon. Zosimus's jaws distended as he shrieked in terror. The young alpha lion was imposing; a muscular titan with a sun-bathed mane and jaws that dripped magma. Zosimus felt defenseless against the enraged father lion. He wanted to run, but his adrenaline kept him fixed in place. Zosimus's body tensed as he prepared to do the only thing that came naturally to the bounty hunter.

Zosimus pounced at the lion, howling with fear and rage. The lion accepted his challenge, roaring with arms outstretched. Zosimus's baboon body became engulfed in flame, and he broke

free through his splitting skin in the form of a burning leopard. Zosimus roared as he collided with the lion, swinging his blazing claws through the lion's pelt. The lion bit Zosimus's throat and tore the smoldering leopard pelt away from his human body. Zosimus hit the sandy floor of the savanna in a recreation of his childhood self. He

was armed with only his fists, fear and fury. Zosimus raised his fists and belted out a war-cry, charging towards the lion as it pounced.

The lion was suddenly immolated mid-flight. Surging flames in the shape of a lion coursed through the airtowards Zosimus's childhood self. Zosimus passed through the immolated lion and the landscape of the hallucination instantly disintegrated. Zosimus returned to the burning red oblivion without a body or any remaining thought. He was disincarnate, floating in a black space devoid of stars. He felt nothing. The throbbing of a pulsating heart reverberated through his mind. Zosimus was suspended within time, immaterial and unending...

Zosimus could hear somebody speaking in the darkness. "Breathe slowly," the shaman said to Zosimus. "You've returned." Zosimus opened his eyes and saw the interior of the timber longhouse, distorted through his tears. He was grateful to see that the hut wasn't filled with the ethereal smoke that had preceded his hallucinations. Sour stomach bile and bitter half-digested iboga bark stewed in his slack jaws. Zosimus's heart thumped dully in his chest, and his head throbbed with the return of a migraine. He groaned and shut his eyes as he waited for the pain to pass.

The one-armed shaman cleared his throat.

"You are safe, now, with my tribe. Find your strength." Zosimus spat out stagnant stomach acid. "Where...where was I...?" The shaman poured water from a buffalo bladder onto Zosimus's

bile-covered face. Zosimus grunted and pulled his head away while the shaman scrubbed the vomit off of his face with a piece of goat-skin. The shaman took Zosimus by the chin and raised his head to look more deeply into his eyes. Zosimus growled and tried to wriggle away, but his body was so weak that he could barely move. He felt too exhausted to even speak, let alone break free from his captor.

Zosimus struggled to make out the details of the shaman's face; everything in the long-house looked fuzzy to the bounty hunter; every surface seemed to shimmer with static electricity. Zosimus assumed it was an after-affect of the iboga. He blinked and tried to clear his vision. He could see the utahraptor snouthanging over the stranger's brow, but he couldn't make out any other details of the shaman's face. The shaman's eyes glowed warmly within the darkness beneath the flayed utahraptor hood.

"You're an *Onjoi*," the shamansaid. "Aren't you?"

The shaman's fingers slid away from Zosimus's jaw, and his head hung forward. Zosimus felt like his arms were going to be pulled out of his shoulder sockets, after hanging from the pole for so long. He heard the shaman cluck his tongue in the manner of a disapproving parent. Zosimus coughed and shook his head, muttering, "...I'm no *Onjoi*."

"Then what are you?" the shaman asked.

Zosimus frowned; it had become difficult to construct his thoughts. "I saw your tattoo," the shaman said. "But you are no baboon." Zosimus looked up at the one-armed shaman. The indigenous

Ovimbundu man was hobbling across the room, supporting his weight against a wooden spear. It was then that Zosimus finally noticed the shaman's disfigurement; his right arm terminated in a stump at the elbow. Zosimus felt a pang of empathy for the mutilated villager. Zosimus had seen countless victims of the machete-amputations that were dealt out by the MPLA and the other rebel militias in Angola.

Zosimus coughed. "Who – what militia - hurt you?" The shaman stopped walking and bowed his head. "It was *ondele*." Zosimus nodded; he remembered the Umbundu word for demons. "I'm sorry..." Zosimus said. "I've lost things to *ondele* as well." "There is no evil in our motherland, *Nyoho Ongongo*," the shaman

said. "Only in man; by ignoring the guidance of *Suku*. Man becomes *ondele* by giving in to fear, by allowing his fear to possess him. Our animal hearts are our greatest tools for fighting through fear, but when possessed by fear, the animal heart becomes a weapon. I think you know the *Onjoi* story of the baboons; of the men that devolved because they did not fight through their fear, allowing their selves to become purely animal..."

Zosimus opened his eyes and found himself staring into the empty eye sockets of the utahraptor hood. Zosimus craned his head away from the leathery snout and said, "You're not making any sense to me, shaman. I'm no *Onjoi* and I don't know what you're talking about."

"*Iboga*," the shaman exclaimed joyously, his voice booming through the long-house. "*Olutanu Suku Onjoi*; the Trial of *Suku*'s dreams. You have experienced the passage through death, seeing through the eyes of *Suku* to his reality beyond our own. What visions did you bring back from beyond this life? What sights were bestowed upon your soul, *yourn'ma*?" Zosimus groaned, shaking his head. His mind reeled with dreams. "I...I don't know," Zosimus muttered. He struggled to make sense

of the surreal memories passing through his mind . “All I remember is...a lion...and a leopard...and I was a baboon. I was watching them. They were fighting for...for food.”

“F or food;for life,” the shaman said, nodding thoughtfully. He planted his spear into the ground and leaned against it, crossing one leg over the other. “This is why man fights; for resources; for power. Man fights for self preservation; for fear; to escape fear. Just as the rebel militias have come to Panopolis for gold, so the colonists fight for fear of losing control. They are all fighting *ondele* within their selves. They foolishly think they are fighting the ‘true’ *ondele*, when they are merely fighting each other instead.”

“Right...” Zo simus mumbled, nodding. “Right. Fighting for food. The lion and the leopard in my vision were fighting for food, but I think...I think...I was the leopard, at one point. But I wasn’t fighting for food. I was fighting the lion because I was scared of it. I didn’t have a choice. I was just thrown to the jaws of the lion like that story the missionaries used to tell us in Silva Porto, David and the Goliath.”

“But a lion is never alone,” the shaman said. “Yes?”

“*Sim*,” Zosimus said, nodding. “Lions are hardly ever alone. The one in my vision wasn’t in a pride, but he had a family. It was a male, his lioness, and their two cubs. The father lion was protecting his family from the leopard, protecting them from...”

The shaman smiled warmly at Zosimus. “Protecting them from...”

“...Me,” Zosimus muttered. “I wasn’t after his cubs. I don’t even remember how I got there. I just know I was scared. I had to fight the lion, I had to kill him to save myself”

“You fought for fear,” the shaman said. “The lion fought for his cubs and their mother. Fighting to protect his loved ones; that is the way of the warrior. But you; the leopard; a panther– have you ever heard the story of how the leopard got its spots?”

Zosimus shook his head. His mind had returned to Pardus.

“Man must not be afraid of living like the leopard,” the shaman said, looking up at the thatching grass roof. “The *Onjoi* children like to call leopards *ondele*, or crocodiles *ondele*; anything scary becomes *ondele*. You could call these new animals, these...feathered serpents...*ondele*. But *ondele* doesn’t mean monster, or only *demon*; it means shadow. Every man, woman, and animal exists with *ondele* within. *Onde*le is allowed by *Suku*, but not desired.”

The shaman rested his hand on Zosimus’s shoulder.

“You see the leopard; the panther; they are really the same animal. The mighty leopard, one of *Suku* and *Nyoho Ongongo*’s greatest creations besides man, is given the choice of how to control his *ondele*

within. Whether that *ondele* is greed, or fear, or rage and violence. The leopard may choose to allow the *ondele* out, to give it the strength to fight greater *ondele*. The leopard wears its *ondele* as the spots on its coat. You may think this *ondele* makes the leopard ugly, but instead, it makes it beautiful. The panther, however, allows the *ondele* to overtake him entirely. He *becomes* the shadow, his *ondele*."

Zosimus envisioned his beheaded mother; her face was only a blur. "You must not be afraid," the shaman whispered. "You must not be afraid of your own *ondele*, the shadow within you. Not everybody is destined by *Suku* to become a warrior, but *Suku* gives everybody the ability to become either a warrior or *ondele*. You may have once lived as a panther, in the company of killers, but if you can fight through your fear; your *ondele*; your shadow; you may begin to live as a leopard, or the warrior you may have once been destined to become." Zosimus could hear the machetes cutting through his mother's neck. The walls that had once contained Zosimus's emotions were no longer standing; his ego had been destroyed by the iboga. The sorrow that had ossified in Zosimus's heart became fluid, slipping through his veins like soothing salves. He began to cry just as he had as a child; just as he had done on so many cold nights in Silva Porto before it became Kuito; just as he had while burying his mortal trauma in so many Angolan refugee prostitutes and empty bottles of liquor paid for with blood money.

The shaman held Zosimus's face in his hand and tilted his head back gently so they were looking at each other. Zosimus recognized the paternal touch and immediately went still. He blinked the tears away until he saw his own reflection staring back, veiled by the wrinkles and white hair of old age. The shaman resembled a manifestation of Zosimus as an elder tribal chieftain, with youthful eyes that betrayed his age. The shaman's mane of dreadlocks was laced with white, woven with berrystained threads in mimics of geometric patterns seen during *Olutanu Suku Onjoi*.

The world seemed to turn silent around the two men. Zosimus began to breathe more heavily, suddenly overcome with emotions he had longed for since he had left his village as a teenager. The shaman's weathered face spread into a warm smile. He cupped Zosimus's face in his hand and touched their foreheads together, laughing like budding thunder. Zosimus began to sob, clenching his eyes shut as the tears streamed down his cheeks. The shaman wiped the tears from Zosimus's sunken sockets. "My son," Sophos Patéras whispered. "I didn't recognize you."

"P-pa *papa*," Zosimus cried. "*Papa*, I'm so sorry, I never should have become *ondele*. I should have stayed with the tribe, I never should have run away— I should have performed *Olutanu Suku Onjoi*— I cannot

remember mother's face, father, I cannot—"

"Be at peace, my son," Sophossaid. "You've completed *Olutanu Suku Onjoi*; you have returned to *Suku*. I forgive you for running away, my son. I know what machete wounds look like – I forgive you for lying to me about your mother and the leopard. I forgive you for becoming *ondele* on the path to forging your warrior heart. All you have left to do is forgive yourself for your *ondele*, my son. You are finally a man." "There are people here," Zosimus said, casting his eyes to the floor in shame. "*Panthers*. Men possessed by their own *ondeles* of greed and hatred and fear. I was guiding these men through *Nyoho Ongongo*, and they killed innocent people, father. They burned an entire village on the savanna. They burned it all; burned every man, woman, and child within; left it to burn alone beneath the sun, and I"

Zosimus ground his teeth, struggling to speak the truth.

"I didn't stop them, father. I was afraid"

"Silence, my son," Sophossaid. "You have lived as a baboon, and you have lived as a leopard. You realize what it means to be a lion; to live for others, rather than to live for yourself. The lion is not like the leopard, even though they are kin of the same tree of life. The lion fights for his pride; he fights for the future of his kind; he fights only for others and not for himself, except to establish the justice of *Nyoho Ongongo's* natural hierarchy."

"But what does it mean?" Zosimus said, craning his head back. "What does any of it matter? These men have killed the innocent, and I couldn't stop them. I was afraid, father. I was afraid of the people in this war, the *ondele* in the jungle, the *ondele* I was serving..."

"Fear is a tool, my son; it is not to be brandished as a weapon," Sophossaid. He tilted Zosimus's head back so they were looking into each other's eyes. "Fear is the greatest tool that our people have ever known. You must confront your fear. Some men become monsters because of their fear; they allow it to guide their actions towards horrible, unspeakable things. But warriors; warriors move through their fear to discover *Suku's* divinity. They become men; the elders of their tribe; the ones that serve to protect their families from those that are manipulated by *ondeles* of fear.

"You have seen the other side; you have experienced life beyond your own body, and you have seen *Suku's* truths beyond this realm of life. You must not forget this lesson, my son. You must use your understanding to become the warrior you could have always become. Who I believe you were meant to become, my son."

Sophos drew a knife and slashed it through Zosimus's binds. Zosimus fell forward without the support of the pole, but Sophos caught him. Zosimus looked into his father's eyes and saw the infinite reserves of strength within, the understanding that his own iboga vision quests

had provided through annihilating his own fear of death.

"Many things have changed, my son," Sophos said gravely.

"Foreigners have come to our land and summoned *ondele* and *esuvi* soul takers - within the forests of *Nyoho Ongongo* in *Suku's* dreams.

There was an explosion, and a map of light replaced the sky. These *esuvi* - the feathered serpents - they came from the waterfall on Mount *Chrysopoeia*. Your older brother, *Eammon*, would have investigated with me..."

Sophos's voice quavered, but he maintained a stoic mask.

"Your brother *Eammon* was killed by UNITA rebels," Sophos said solemnly. "We have been fighting to survive, and it has been difficult, but we have remained in our village. The animals that the Foreigners call 'dinosaurs'; they lurk through the jungle, and they steal some of our game, but they haven't taken anybody else from our tribe. I killed the animal whose pelt I wear, and we haven't encountered any in our village since."

Sophos smiled grimly and helped *Zosimus* to stand.

"Come, my son," Sophos said. "You must be home for a reason."

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT- DAVID VERSUS THE GOLIATH

Zosimus shielded his eyes from the evening sun as he stepped out of his father's longhouse, into the open air of a jungle clearing.

Sunbeams scattered through the surrounding mahogany trees, revealing a ring of huts that circled the longhouse. The shelters were built atop a low hill beside a bend in the *Akhmim* River. From *Zosimus's* vantage point he could see the tree-line canopy at eye level, with shimmering heat rays obscuring the dark shape of Mount *Chrysopoeia* looming further south.

The *Onjoi* were going about their daily rituals, tending to fledgling families of domesticated goats and chickens. Upon seeing Sophos *Patéras's* prodigal son, the adults of the tribe ceased in their chores and ran over, shouting to greet him. *Zosimus* raised his arms weakly as the mob surrounded him, chanting and crying with joy. He recognized the faces of his father's closest friends as well as the exuberant smiles of his cousins, now grown into warriors, hunters, pastoral farmers and fishermen. They shouted his name and placed their hands over his body, singing with the cathartic joy of reclaiming a long-lost loved one.

Zosimus felt uncomfortable and foreign amongst the *Onjoi* tribe, shirtless and barefoot in a pair of ragged khaki pants. After the past decade of violence, the concept of warmth and love were as unfamiliar to *Zosimus* as *Josef's* dreams of Europe. *Zosimus* raised his hands above his head and accepted the tribe's exaltation. Sophos waved them away, shouting in the *Umbundu* language.

"Let my son breathe," Sophos said. "He is serving *Suku* now."

Zosimus pulled Sophos aside once the other villagers were gone. "Father – the *ondele* that killed the villagers on the savanna are still here," Zosimus whispered. "They're coming to the Foreigners' camp that you spoke of, by the waterfall on Mount Chrysopoeia. If they find this village, they'll burn it down like they did to the other. I have to stop them before they can find the *Onjoi*; we can't let them end any more lives."

"It's funny you should say that," Sophos said. He waved at a pair of *Onjoi* warriors that were guarding a hut across the clearing. The two men ran inside the adobe shelter, dragging somebody out by his arms. Zosimus watched as the warriors hauled out a white man dressed in muddy khakis. The captive shouted in English, kicking and squirming as he was pulled along to Zosimus and Sophos.

"No speak Swahili!" the white man yelled. "I said *no speak!*"

Zosimus exclaimed, "Doctor Wynn!"

"You know this man?" Sophos asked, glancing at Zosimus.

"Yes; he is a good man," Zosimus said. "He can't hurt anybody."

"Can't?" Andrei snapped irritably. "Or won't?"

"Either," Zosimus grunted. "Both. Take your pick."

Sophos spoke a few words in Umbundu to the *Onjoi* warriors, and they released their hold on Andrei's arms. The Russian scientist hit the ground with a grunt of pain and quickly climbed back to his feet, dusting off his khaki fatigues.

"Right," Andrei grumbled. "Same treatment, different country."

Zosimus, comrade; I saw what happened to Flores. Have you seen Syd? Pardus?"

"Lalo's dead," Zosimus said. "Syd murdered him, and then he drugged me and left me for dead. Said Pardus was going to come back for me after they got you. Where's the CIA agent, Disciple?"

"Dead," Andrei said. "Pardus has been working against us this entire time; he's a double agent trying to sabotage this mission just to kidnap me. Disciple had a location tracker that can summon an evac, but Pardus stole it and killed him. If we can cut Pardus off at the Axis Mundi collider, we could take the location tracker from Pardus and get out of here alive."

"What's a collider?" Sophos said, looking at Zosimus. "A weapon," Zosimus said. He glanced at Andrei. "Right?"

"Right," Andrei said. "Axis Mundi Corporation built the collider here with the aid of the US Government in a bid to create antimatter bombs for the Portuguese. Our entire mission to destroy the collider was a cover-up to hide any evidence of an American business building weapons of mass destruction in this collapsing country. Everybody involved in the mission is dead, and Pardus is to blame. All that matters now is killing the bastard so we can get the hell out of here."

"That means Molnar was right," Zosimus muttered. "All of these people killed out of fear, and all in the name of washing away your government's mistakes. This is pure *ekandu*; evil."

"Pardus and his location tracker are our only way home," Andrei said.

"Or, at least, our only way out of this jungle. I need your help, bounty hunter. I can't stop him alone."

"I'll go," Zosimus said. "The *ondele* will die for this *ekandu*."

"Do you have any weapons?" Andrei asked. "I'm unarmed."

"Father," Zosimus said, turning to Sophos. "Do you have rifles?"

"*Father*?" Andrei repeated. "This is your *father*, bounty hunter?"

"Indeed," Zosimus sighed. "It seems I've returned home."

"Family reunions are wonderful, but the more pressing detail is firepower," Andrei said. He turned to Sophos. "Do you have any guns? Grenades? Flamethrowers?"

Sophos shook his head. "Our warriors didn't find any weapons on my son, and we don't have any rifles here. We only have spears and daggers for hunting. We don't fight the way the 'civilized' people do."

"*Cyka blyat*," Andrei said, scratching his head. "Go get the spears."

Syd Kinane was pressed flat beneath the tall grass that lined the riverbank below the knoll the village sat upon. He held his M60 in one hand and used the other to press Xavier's bloodstained walkie-talkie to his cheek. Syd's swollen tongue ran across his blistering lips as he watched the *Onjoi* warriors idly pace around the adobe shelters. He stared unblinkingly, nervously tapping his finger against the trigger of his belt-fed machine gun.

Syd whispered, "I'm here, Pardus. I found the village."

"Good," the walkie-talkie buzzed. "I scouted it before, and it appears to be another MPLA front working for the Cuban *Leóns* that Lalo was serving with. I saw the rebels piling their crates of gold inside the longhouse at the center of the clearing. Clear them out of our way; leave nobody alive. Once you take care of it, come meet me at the collider and we'll finish this mission together. Captain Wise and the others won't die in vain."

"But what if there's children?" Syd whispered. His mind was a confused storm, lost in a whirlwind of images from the burning village. His hands, fatigue jacket, and ka-bar were all caked with Lalo's blood. Syd had believed the death to be necessary, but he couldn't shake the memories of the past few years they had served together. Syd figured he would always regret it whenever he remembered their time with Stalker Force, hunting Xipetotec and the other utahraptors across the earth.

"I feel sick, Nguyen," Syd whispered hoarsely. "I think--"

"My call-sign is *Pardus*," the walkie-talkie hissed. "Everybody in that village is guilty, Kinane. You know they are. They're harboring

enemies of the United States; these animals have been sabotaging our operation from the start. If anybody gets in your way - anybody at all - cut them down. Make them scared, GI."

"Yes sir," Syd whispered. "I'll kill them all."

"Call me when it's done," Pardus said, and the static went dead.

Syd put the walkie-talkie back into his ruck sack and raised his M60.

It had been a long time since he had staked out an enemy encampment, and his first time doing so alone. He could have created a plan, but there was nothing in his mind but crackling, hungry flames. The adrenaline in his veins, the steady stream of fear flowing through his heart, made him feel that he had no other options. Syd thought that if there was more gold hidden within the village long-house, the sacrifices would all be worth it in the end.

Syd stood up from the grass and the warriors that were gathered at the edge of the village began to shout in alarm. The *Onjoi* warriors aimed their spears at Syd, feigning around the adobe shelters to flank him. Syd recognized their strategy, and he aimed the M60 at the first *Onjoi* warrior he shared eye contact with. Syd pulled the trigger of his M60 and it roared like the Goliath, ripping the warrior apart with a rope of screaming lead. The young *Onjoi* man shrieked as the bullets split his belly open, spilling his innards to the clearing. The other warriors ducked away, seeking cover behind the clay huts. The wounded *Onjoi* man was cradling his intestines in a stunned daze, gazing at the forest with a thousand-yard stare.

Syd brought the wounded *Onjoi* warrior down with several shots from the M60 aimed at the man's spinal column. Syd could already hear the screams of women and children as the dead young man hit the ground facefirst. The wailing of the vulnerable villagers brought Syd's mind back to Tiger Force, and all reasoning left him. Syd growled and withdrew a grenade, pulling the pin between his teeth.

He was ready to see the savages burn.

Across the village, Zosimus had heard the grenade explode and instinctively ducked. Andrei and Sophos were crouched beside him, covering their heads with their hands. They could hear the screams of the women and children that were cowering within the adobe shelters. A few warriors came running towards Zosimus, waving their spears high above their heads. Zosimus immediately snatched the spear from his father and held it in both hands. He turned to Andrei and said, "Distract whoever's attacking, whether it's Pardus or Syd. Keep them occupied and I'll take them down."

"What about me?" Sophos said. "What about our warriors?" "I'll handle it," Zosimus said. "I know how these animals fight." Sophos nodded and turned to his warriors, instructing them to

protect the women and children. Andrei scrambled around the side of the village, ducking behind the shelters as he ran. Zosimus turned to run and Sophos shouted after him, "Good luck, my son!"

Zosimus sprinted downhill to the jungle and dropped beneath the thick palm grove. He felt his heart beating powerfully in his chest, driving him forward through the long grass that covered the knoll. He felt no fear for the attacker; he was only worried for the innocent villagers. Zosimus crawled to the opposite end of the clearing and saw Syd trudging up the hill. Syd's M60 was aimed at the adobe shelters, his shoulders hunched as he staggered closer. Zosimus could immediately see that the man had lost his mind; his eyes were like lifeless cinders.

Andrei stumbled around the village and into Syd's line of sight. He raised his hands above his head as Syd directed the M60 towards him. "Don't shoot, Kinane," Andrei yelled. "Don't shoot! I'm unarmed." Syd cocked his head to the side like a dog, staring at Andrei.

"Doctor Wynn? What are you doing here?"

"I ran away," Andrei said. "I know you murdered Lalo."

"You don't know what yer talkin' about," Syd croaked, shuffling closer to the lanky scientist with his M60 raised. "Pardus knew Flores was a spy for the Cubans. You're not a spy too, are you Doctor Wynn? Who's been hiding you here?"

"No, goddammit," Andrei stammered, trying to keep his voice slow and steady. "Nobody was working for the Cubans. Pardus was the double agent all along. The only reason we were here to begin with was to cover up the United States' involvement in building the Axis Mundi collider. Lalo was innocent, Syd. You *murdered* him."

"You're *lying*," Syd screamed, staggering closer. "I don't want to hurt you, Doctor Wynn, but I will. Get on your knees and don't move. I'll detain you; I don't have to kill you. We'll both get out of here, and we'll figure things out. It doesn't have to end any different than that." Zosimus was inching closer, crawling on his fingertips and toes. The grass slid beneath his bare torso, brushing the mud from his skin. He held the spear in one hand, testing its weight. He could throw it, but he couldn't risk missing Syd. At the same time, he couldn't let Andrei stall any longer. Zosimus felt his heartbeat in his throat, the adrenaline and leftover iboga lifting him high above the earth. He unconsciously rose from the undergrowth, slowly approaching Syd's backside.

"I'm innocent, comrade," Andrei said. He glanced at Zosimus and quickly looked back to Syd. "I haven't harmed anybody, and nobody is sheltering me here. I just want to go home; I don't want anybody else to get hurt. I haven't seen any Cubans or MPLA rebels here. We can

leave and forget this place, comrade. We can still fulfill our mission.” Syd noticed Andrei’s break of eye contact and turned to where the scientist had been looking. Zosimus quickly pressed his body flat beneath the ferns behind the herculean soldier. Syd looked over his shoulder, peering at the mahogany trees that surrounded the knoll. Andrei was shaking in his boots, unable to think of what to do. He shook his head, thinking *‘what the hell’*, and threw himself into Syd’s broad torso.

Syd stumbled back, stepping on top of Zosimus’s spear. He lifted Andrei by the belt and heaved him aside with one hand. Andrei tumbled down the grassy knoll as Syd fired the M60 after him, shredding through the foliage. Andrei screamed as a bullet sliced through the side of his hip. He clutched at his pelvis and crawled behind a stand of mahogany trees, away from Syd’s barking M60. “Coward,” Syd screamed. “Commie traitor! I trusted you!”

Zosimus let go of the spear and jumped up from the undergrowth, pushing Syd’s M60 into the air. The rifle screamed at the sun as the belt of ammunition danced across Zosimus’s face. Syd swung his elbow down and struck Zosimus in the temple. Lights flashed within the momentary darkness in Zosimus’s skull as he hit the ground head-first. Zosimus grabbed Syd’s legs and pulled his feet out from under him. The M60 flew from Syd’s hands and bounced down the verdant knoll. Zosimus quickly clambered onto Syd’s body, but the goliath American kicked him off as hard as a mule.

Zosimus hit the ground on his back, and Syd kicked him in the side of the head. Zosimus barked in pain and attempted to shield himself from Syd’s swinging boots. Syd unsheathed his machete and raised it above his head, screaming like a wild animal.

“Goddamned *African!*”

Syd swung the machete as Zosimus rolled away. The blade plunged through the soft turf beside Zosimus’s head and sank down to its hilt. Zosimus dug his hands into the ground and swung his legs into the back of Syd’s knees, knocking him off-balance. Syd tugged at his machete, but it was tightly gripped by the African clay. Zosimus bolted upright and threw a fist into the side of Syd’s thick neck. Syd buckled, but barely acknowledged the blow. He threw his elbow back into Zosimus’s face, spinning him around.

Syd finally withdrew his machete and swung it at the bounty hunter. Zosimus ducked from the swinging blade and grabbed his father’s spear, tumbling aside. When Zosimus was back on his feet, Syd charged. He raised the machete for a fatal blow, howling as he swung the blade. Zosimus heaved the spear towards Syd, but the machete *whacked* through the wooden haft, severing the pole in two. Zosimus looked at the splintered end of the spear, then up to see Syd’s machete

whistling towards his face.

Zosimus ducked away as the blade wisped past his face. He thrust the splintered end of the spear forward and buried it into Syd's eye socket. Syd screamed and fell backwards, clawing at his penetrated eye. He swung the machete blindly as he pawed at the pulped socket. The eye had been split open, and countless splinters were buried within the masticated jelly. Syd howled, still swinging the machete as he attempted to see Zosimus with his good eye.

Zosimus remembered the female carnotaurus and started feigning around Syd's blind side, dancing around his body. The machete whipped past Zosimus's face and he caught Syd's wrist in one hand, halting the blade mid-flight. He quickly kicked Syd in the groin, doubling him over, and pulled the machete from his paws. Syd cried out in pain as he crumpled to his knees, his hands raised over his head for mercy.

"I'm sorry," Syd slurred. "I was just followin' orders, please--"

Zosimus swung the machete into the base of Syd's neck, splitting the flesh open wide. The wound resembled a blossoming flower, with bright pink petals of musculature tissue oozing red nectar. Syd's cries fell to a gurgling choke that reminded Zosimus of waking up to Lalo's death rattle. Zosimus yanked the machete out of Syd's neck and raised it to the sun suspended above the clearing.

Syd sneered and croaked, "Fuck you, nigg"

Zosimus swung the machete through Syd's neck, cleaving through his cervical vertebrae. The machete sliced cleanly through the paper-thin remainder of skin and Syd's slack-jawed head tumbled down from the stump of his neck. Zosimus watched as the severed head rolled clumsily downhill. Syd's kneeling corpse shuddered violently, the muscles going hay-wire from the nervous system's sudden disconnection. Zosimus pushed Syd's carcass over with his foot and the limp figure rag-dolled its way down the knoll, splashing into the Akhmim River beyond the treeline.

Andrei crawled out from the periphery of the forest, staring at Syd's severed head with bloodshot eyes. He looked up at Zosimus, a shadow standing resolute before the white-hot sun. Zosimus stared down at Andrei, his chest heaving with powerful respirations. He raised the machete above his head and roared like a victorious lion. Upon hearing Zosimus's war-cry, the *Onjoi* villagers started peeking out of their huts. They saw their prodigal son standing tall and they cheered, racing across the clearing to thank him. Sophos pushed through the throng to his son, laughing with pride.

"You did it, my son," Sophos said. "You killed the *ondele*!"

Zosimus blinked, shaking his head. He waved away the shouting mob and stumbled towards Andrei. The young scientist was on his feet,

glancing at the cut on his waist. The bullet from Syd's M60 had only grazed him. Andrei was bleeding from his hip and clearly in pain, but the adrenaline and endorphins kept him on his feet. He looked up at Zosimus and smiled shakily.

"I'm not so sad to see him go," Andrei said. "Good work, comrade."

"Our work has only begun; we still have to find Pardus," Zosimus said. He turned to Sophos. "Father— where is this Foreigners' camp? Where did they release the *ondele* and *esuvi* from?"

"Further south, where the waterfall of Mount Chrysopoeia meets the Akhmim River," Sophos said. "You remember the waterfall, my son, don't you? It was where we...found your mother..."

"I remember, father," Zosimus said, nodding slowly. He felt as though his dreams and nightmares were finally becoming clear. "Stay here, and I'll return soon. Andrei; take any weapons that you can from Syd's body. I'm going to get you out of here."

Andrei nodded and ran over to Syd's carcass. Zosimus turned to his father and said, "Protect the village. In case the *ondele* we're looking for comes here, you have to be ready. He won't show any remorse; you have to kill him if you see him. He's about my size; my build. Tan; long black hair; black uniform. You understand, father?"

"I understand," Sophos said. "Now go, my son. Fight for your people. Do what you must to rid the jungle of this panther; this *ondele*."

"I will, father," Zosimus said, putting his hand on Sophos's shoulder. "If I don't return, don't come looking for me. Keep our people safe. Don't let anything happen to them."

"Of course," Sophos said, embracing his son. When they pulled apart, Andrei was racing towards them, carrying a .45 revolver in one hand. Syd's M60 was slung over his shoulder. Andrei nodded to Sophos, and then turned to face Zosimus.

"Not to spoil the moment, but we have work to do," Andrei said, extending the M60 to Zosimus. "Are you ready, bounty hunter?" Zosimus took the M60 from Andrei's hands with a resolute nod. "Let's go kill a panther, *irmão*."

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE— JOHN OF PATMOS

Zosimus and Andrei followed the Akhmim River south through the forested lower foothills to Mount Chrysopoeia. The climb was arduous, and the pair often had to crawl on their hands and feet through the razor-tipped palms that blanketed the hillsides. They had decided to avoid the road, to avoid detection by Pardus or *El Leóns*. Zosimus didn't want to encounter the Cuban Special Forces without Lalo by his side, and he felt sure that Pardus would be waiting for him and Andrei when they arrived at the Axis Mundi compound. Zosimus hoped that the utahraptors would find Pardus first. Zosimus and Andrei followed the Akhmim River to its source, where

its waters plummeted from a buttress set against the base of Mount Chrysopoeia. The rock wall had been carved by the waterfall into a staggered staircase of slate, sloping down into the water. The buttress that the water poured from was well over a hundred feet above the forest floor, but Zosimus knew from childhood experience that it was a false summit. The peak of the Mount Chrysopoeia was far above the falls.

Zosimus checked to make sure neither man nor beast were near the stream before waving Andrei forward. Andrei scrambled along the muddy shore and cautiously stepped onto the slick slate stones that lined the basin of the waterfall. The roar of crashing water was deafening, silencing all the sounds of wildlife except for the shrill cries of the baboons echoing from the canopy surrounding the falls.

Zosimus surveyed the waterfall, following the frothing airborne waves with his eyes up to the ledge. Sunlight poured forth through a break in the canopy, painting the plummeting mist into an iridescent rainbow shower. Zosimus's heart welled as he watched the jade bodies of redcrested turaco birds sweep through the open air above the waterfall. He had felt the same awe as a child, when he first scaled the rock wall with his mother watching below. Zosimus closed his eyes and stepped through the veil of falling water. He placed his hands against the cold buttress wall and opened his eyes. Veins of gold within the dark granite shimmered beneath his fingertips.

Zosimus lost his breath and stumbled back from the gilded black rock. He had seen the treasure within the waterfall on countless nights as he relived thememory of his mother's murder. He had once thought that the gold would help the *Onjoi* escape Angola; a childish dream that had led to nearly two decades of nightmares.

Zosimus turned around and trembled as he stared at the sheets of falling water. The same fear had possessed him as a child when the rapists took their kukris to his mother. Zosimus was afraid that when he stepped through the waterfall, he would see her headless body lying on the muddy bank.

Move through your fear.

Zosimus held his breath and stepped through the cleansing veil of water. When he opened his eyes, he saw Andrei washing his face in the frothy pool below. Zosimus took Josef's gold out of his pocket and raised it over his head, whistling sharply to get Andrei's attention. Andrei held up his finger to silence the bounty hunter as he drank greedily from the stream. Zosimus walked down to Andrei and knelt down beside him, holding out the yellow gem.

"Josef said that Sydtook this from the village," Zosimus said. "Its gold; there's more of it on the other side of the waterfall."

Andrei sat upright and peered at the stone, adjusting his glasses. When

Andrei recognized the rock, he immediately smacked it out of the bounty hunter's hand. Zosimus looked at Andrei in bewilderment as the scientist backed away from the stream, wiping his hands on his chest.

"That isn't gold, comrade," Andrei muttered. "It's uranium ore."

"Uranium?" Zosimus repeated. "Fools gold?"

"*Dah*, you could call it that," Andrei said. "Its radioactive."

Zosimus shook his head in dismay. The gold that he had once believed would promise escape was nothing more than a cancerous toxin. Josef had died just to give Zosimus fool's gold; Zosimus's mother had suffered for his poisonous dream. The proto-FNLA rebels that had murdered her had done so in the blind pursuit of a carcinogenic rock. The only gold that existed in the heart of Zosimus's motherland was worthless to the people of Angola. It would only ever be valuable to the most powerful of countries; nations that were just as detached from the suffering of the indigenous Angolan people as the Portuguese colonists had been.

"I have a theory," Andrei said. "Lead the way, comrade."

Zosimus raised the M60 and paced around the waterfall, directing the barrel of the rifle to the forest uphill. He walked to the top of the bank and crouched beneath the ferns at the edge of the clearing. Andrei held the .45 magnum in both hands as he crept up to the bounty hunter's side. Zosimus held the M60 in one hand and parted the lush fronds to get a better look at the Axis Mundi compound beyond.

What remained of the Axis Mundi compound had been left in near ruins. Most of the buildings that ringed the clearing were dilapidated or completely demolished. There were several concrete bunkers reduced to rubble throughout the wide expanse; the only building left standing was a hangar-sized structure sitting with its back to the base of Mount Chrysopoeia. In the weeks that had passed since the implosion, ivy had quickly spread across and spilled over the roof of the construct. To Zosimus it looked like a concrete hangar, or a militarized warehouse. There was a massive breach in the front of the construct, with moss hanging in sheets over the fractured wall.

Andrei crouched beside Zosimus. "Anybody home?" "No," Zosimus whispered. "Pardus, perhaps."

"*Dah*," Andrei said. He pointed past Zosimus, to the construct sitting against the cliff. "That big building has to be where the collider is held. If we're going to find a radio, it's in there."

"Forget a radio," Zosimus said. "We're finding Pardus."

"Fair enough," Andrei said, rubbing the back of his neck. "He has Disciple's homing beacon anyway. So what should we do, comrade? I could create a diversion. Distract him so you can get him by surprise."

"It seems like that's all you've been good for," Zosimus said, smirking

despite himself. "Go on out there, *irmão*. I'll keep an eye on you." "Wish me luck," Andrei grunted, raising the .45 revolver in both hands. He waded through the ferns and into the clearing, his shoulders stooped as he walked low to the ground. He stepped around the toppled body of a truck, peering around the upended cab. The roar of the waterfall filled Andrei's ears, but he could hear more of the animals in the jungle beyond the clearing. He heard the droning buzz of locust and the squawking of birds, but no dinosaurs. Andrei exhaled slowly, trying to steady his hands.

Andrei glanced over his shoulder, but he couldn't see Zosimus hiding in the brush. He faced forward and crept along the length of the overturned truck, darting towards a jeep sitting across the compound. There were no standing perimeter fences, which made Andrei nervous. He didn't think a defunct fence would deter any of the utahraptors, but it could possibly ward off the larger predators, like the carcharodontosaurus and the carnotaurus...

The sound of footsteps echoed from within the concrete building. Andrei dropped down beside the jeep and crawled underneath of it, dragging his legs across mulched tree bark and dirt. He looked out between the front tires and aimed the .45 revolver at the gaping breach in the building's facade. Andrei thought of getting inside of the decrepit vehicle, but he didn't want to risk giving away his position. He wanted to see Pardus walk out, lest he make their ambush obvious. Nothing emerged from the collider.

Andrei narrowed his eyes, attempting to peer through the shadows that filled the breach in the face of the sole building still standing. He could see scant sunlight falling upon the splintered glass and metal walls of the collider inside, illuminating dripping rainwater and leaf litter. Andrei pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. He breathed shallowly, fighting to contain his restless energy beneath the humvee. He could feel the pulse in his hands throbbing against the warm steel of the revolver.

A taloned foot stepped beside the jeep and Andrei turned still. Andrei's eyes crawled along the ground, past the tire beside his head, over the long sickle-shaped toe claw on a utahraptor's foot. Andrei stared in shock as the time-worn talon tapped against the ground. Xipetotec walked past the humvee, towards the collider.

Andrei stared unblinkingly as the eight-foot high dromaeosaurid approached the abandoned construct. Andrei distanced himself from his gnawing terror by observing the utahraptor through the filter of scientific observation. Andrei noticed that the animal seemed wary as it neared the building that housed the collider. Xipetotec's fleshy head flicked to and fro at every sound that rose from the surrounding jungle. Xipetotec's ghastly eyes never seemed to stop moving; perhaps

it was aware of Andrei's presence.

Xipetotec hissed lowly; hesitant.

Andrei had never heard such apprehensiveness within the vocalization of a utahraptor. Before Andrei had a chance to ponder the irregularity, he heard a second utahraptor hissing from across the clearing.

Without moving his head, Andrei allowed his eyes to slide towards the source of the sound. A tan-coated *citrinitas* utahraptor emerged from the periphery of the clearing, chirruping as it approached Xipetotec.

Andrei had to fight the violent trembling in his limbs to keep still.

Every instinct in his body filled him with the enervating urge of fight-or-flight. If he remained any longer, he would be caught. He understood this as well as he understood a utahraptor's preferred method of killing prey.

Memories of disemboweled victims lingered on Andrei's mind.

The second utahraptor came to Xipetotec's side, and a third utahraptor pounced from the jungle onto the body of the truck. The overturned vehicle shook beneath the animal's sudden weight; Xipetotec grunted irritably at the beta, baring his charred fangs. The beta male hissed and leapt off of the truck, ducking away from the alpha. Xipetotec grunted again as a warning to the underling. Andrei shivered as he watched the animals, clenching the revolver so tightly that his hands became numb.

The four utahraptors fell silent as they faced the compound.

Andrei wondered, '*What are they doing?*'

Xipetotec spread his malformed jaws and bellowed at the breach in the face of the building, filling the structure with his horrendous scream. When Xipetotec snapped his jaws shut, the sound echoed back from the inside of the building like a whip-crack. The three *citrinitas* utahraptors remained quiet, bobbing their heads curiously as they peered into the darkness. Xipetotec's echoing howl was returned from within the compound, and a fifth utahraptor emerged from the building.

"*Caudapavonis*," Andrei whispered. "*The fifth utahraptor subtype.*"

The *caudapavonis* utahraptor was covered in a shimmering coat of blue and green iridescent feathers. Xipetotec took a few steps towards the *caudapavonis* utahraptor and bowed, his plucked forearms spread wide. The *caudapavonis* utahraptor puffed out the feathers on its mane, revealing rows of iris-mimicking spots around its neck and head. Xipetotec let out a sharp whistle through his soot-stained teeth and took a step back in alarm.

The *citrinitas* utahraptors spread their arms wide and barked back at the *caudapavonis* utahraptor, but Xipetotec silenced them with a single grunt. The rest of the pack quieted down, ducking their heads low to growl at the unfamiliar utahraptor. Xipetotec stared at the

caudapavonis utahraptor and uttered a series of chuffs that came from deep within his scarred throat.

The *caudapavonis* utahraptor chuffed back at Xipetotec in the same rhythmic pattern, adding a whimper at the end. Xipetotec gave a low, rumbling growl as his feathers bristled. Andrei stared, entranced by the ritualistic display. He was dimly aware that Zosimus was crawling beneath the jeep beside him.

Zosimus whispered, “*Irmão*.”

Andrei clapped his hand over Zosimus’s mouth.

The utahraptors snapped their heads in the jeep’s direction.

Xipetotec growled, flicking his tail like an excited cat. Andrei and Zosimus remained completely still beneath the jeep. The utahraptors stared at the humvee until Xipetotec caught their attention with an authoritative bark. The *citrinitas* utahraptors turned away from the humvee and watched as Xipetotec paced around the *caudapavonis* utahraptor.

The *caudapavonis* utahraptor groaned, lowering its body to the ground as a sign of submission. Xipetotec grunted, lifting his head to show his own passive dominance. The *citrinitas* utahraptors began to chirrup excitedly, wagging the fanned-out feathers on the ends of their tails. The *caudapavonis* utahraptor turned around to bark at the building that housed the collider, and several identical utahraptors emerged from the darkness. The *caudapavonis* utahraptors growled as they defensively circled their alpha, snapping their jaws at Xipetotec and his pack.

The *citrinitas* utahraptors snarled back, arching their backs in preparation to fight, but Xipetotec halted them with an irritable growl. The *caudapavonis* utahraptors remained agitated, poised to attack with their heads held low and their arms spread. A few of the *caudapavonis* utahraptors shook their forearm feathers; Andrei recognized this as a defensive display that he assumed was shared by all of the utahraptor subtypes. The *caudapavonis* utahraptor alpha stood up next to Xipetotec and they rubbed their necks together. Both utahraptor alphas then turned to their perspective packs, fanning their tail feathers while rumbling softly through their throats.

The two utahraptor packs looked at their alphas, then to each other, and the hostility between the animals immediately ceased. Andrei and Zosimus watched as the utahraptors began to mingle, rubbing their bodies against one another, examining each other’s resplendent pelts. They appeared to be excited, suddenly gleeful with the appearance of long-lost brethren. The combined pack began a chorus of yelping barks as they darted across the clearing, bounding downhill through the jungle.

Andrei stared until the animals were gone. He finally let go of his

breath and allowed his head to drop onto the carpet of mulch. The silence that always pervaded in the presence of utahraptors gave way to the familiar din of birds and monkeys crying throughout the canopy. Zosimus nudged Andrei in the ribs and the scientist flinched, cracking the back of his head against the jeep's undercarriage. Andrei groaned and covered his bruised scalp with one hand.

"Sorry, *irmão*," Zosimus whispered. "What just happened?"

"*Cyka blyat*," Andrei mumbled, rubbing the back of his head. "I think those blue and green utahraptors, the *caudapavonis* subtype, might have been brought here by the Axis Mundi collider. Utahraptors, and dromeosaurids in general, are some of the most intelligent animals to have ever lived. Their intelligence is on par with that of dolphins, but if modern corvids are any indication, they might have a depth of reasoning and intelligence that goes beyond anything Captain Wise and I could have ever predicted."

"Corvids?" Zosimus repeated.

"Crows," Andrei said. "Ravens; birds of that family have incredible prowess with tool manipulation and problem-solving. What we just saw reminds me of Bonobos; they're closely related to Chimpanzees, almost like twins on the same evolutionary branch. Chimpanzees are highly territorial and aggressive, but bonobo's are much more docile. When bonobos encounter other troops of bonobos in the wild, they usually do so in peace. Bonobos solve their problems peacefully, unlike humans, who solve their problems like chimps."

"Okay," Zosimus said. "So utahraptors are like bonobos?"

"Only in the sense of how unfamiliar packs orient with one another," Andrei said. "I've never seen this kind of behavior before; as far as we know, all of the utahraptors that have existed on earth since the incident in Vietnam have come from the same origin; the original collider. I don't think these *Caudapavonis* utahraptors are connected to the four subtypes I've documented with Stalker Force; *Nigredo*, *Albedo*, *Citrinitas* and *Rubedo*."

"We can worry about it later," Zosimus grunted. He crawled out from under the jeep and dragged Andrei out beside him. "We need to find Pardus, or set a trap and wait for him."

"I think this is a significant discovery, comrade," Andrei said. He wiped the sweat from his brow with a clammy, trembling hand. "The utahraptors do not come from the same origin; this means they should be as far apart socially as wolves from different countries, or even different periods in time. To the contrary, these separate utahraptor colonies immediately coalesced. It is something unheard of with animals of this intelligence, but maybe not birds..."

"Are you done?" Zosimus said. He raised the M60 in both hands.

"I'm sorry," Andrei sighed. "I just miss my *bratan*, Captain Wise."

“Sim,” Zosimus nodded. “I will miss *meu irmão*, Josef.”

Zosimus extended a hand to Andrei and pulled the scientist to his feet. With the M60 leading the way, Zosimus and Andrei approached the entrance to the complex that housed the collider. Zosimus tugged open the steel blast-door and waved Andrei inside. They quickly entered the facility and shut the door behind them, cutting off the light of the outside world. Andrei took off his rucksack and rummaged through it until he found a military-grade flashlight.

Zosimus kept the M60 aimed at the corners of the room as Andrei thumped the flashlight against the meat of his fist. The torch switched on and illuminated particles of golden dust drifting through the darkness. Andrei drew the beam across metal tables, defunct computers, and open filing cabinets. Andrei looked at the labels on each filing cabinet until he saw one marked ‘Personnel’. A manila folder was resting horizontally across the top of the cabinet, opened to a dossier with a polaroid photo attached.

“What are you doing, *irmão*?” Zosimus asked.

“Somebody left this for us to find,” Andrei said. “I assume Pardus.” Andrei threw the folder onto a table beside Zosimus and pointed the light at the top of the folder. Zosimus immediately recognized the face of the man in the dossier picture, as well as the name at the top of the document. It read ‘Chief Developer – Axis Mundi Corporation– Dr. Marlow Kurtz’. Zosimus touched the kukri sheathed on his hip as he remembered the original bounty that had brought him all the way back to New Fátima. Andrei’s shoulders buckled and he leaned against the table, covering his face with one hand as he wept over the photograph. “Marlow Kurtz,” Andrei mumbled. “He changed his name.” “You know this man?” Zosimus asked. “How?”

Andrei wiped the tears from his eyes. “He is my father, comrade.” Zosimus stared at Andrei. He set the M60 on the table and put a hand on Andrei’s shoulder. “*Irmão*, Pardus paid me to...to kill him. I am sorry. If I had known”

“I had spent my entire life believing he was dead,” Andrei said. “I had heard rumors from Molnar about some initiative by the CIA called ‘Operation Paperclip’. Supposedly they took Nazi scientists from Germany after the Second World War and erased their identities, making them into American citizens. I was taken from my father after the Battle of Berlin by the KGB and forced to create their first collider, based on my father’s designs.”

“Why would Pardus want him dead?” Zosimus said.

“My father must have been responsible for the sabotage of this collider,” Andrei said. “My designs for the U.S.S.R were based on my father’s own blueprints for Nazi Germany. The colliders were always intended to be built with this secondary, hidden function; to create

rifts in space time. If Axis Mundi Corporation is developing colliders based on the designs that my father and I made, that means that they can all be 'sabotaged' as easily as this one was. I have a feeling my father triggered this one for the same reason I triggered the one in Vietnam."

"Why would anybody do that?" Zosimus asked. "For dinosaurs?"

"For the Aeon of Ouroboros," Andrei said. "It's a long story."

Zosimus grunted, "Was your father in Ordo Ouroboros, *irmão*?"

Andrei lowered the flashlight and stared at Zosimus.

"How do you know of Ordo Ouroboros, bounty hunter?" "Pardus told me about it," Zosimus said. "He offered me to join."

"That's not good," Andrei said, shaking his head. "Ordo Ouroboros is a secret society, bounty hunter. They have been around since their founding by the Ammonites; Moloch-worshipping mystics from the ancient Canaanite kingdom of Ammon. Ordo Ouroboros's ultimate plan is to bring about the 'Aeon of Ouroboros'; a total reset of the Earth - back to the 'trees of the garden' described in the Book of Ezekiel from the Judaic *TaNakh* - their own recreated Garden of Eden."

Zosimus grunted, "I do not understand this missionary-speak." "The Aeon of Ouroboros means doomsday," Andrei said. "I was contacted by members of Ordo Ouroboros when I was working for the U.S.S.R in Vietnam, when they pushed me to sabotage the first collider. That was a test for them, unbeknownst to me. I had hoped that my assumed identity and my work with Stalker Force would have kept me away from Ordo Ouroboros, but it seems Pardus has found me."

"What do they want with you?" Zosimus asked.

"Revenge," Andrei shrugged. "Most likely, for turning my back on my father and his father, the leader of Ordo Ouroboros. My father and I were meant to bring about the Aeon of Ouroboros with the colliders; the plan was to drive both cold war superpowers into mass producing the machines, then sabotaging them simultaneously to bring about the final World War. Once that could happen, Ordo Ouroboros would be the sole inheritors of the earth. That, and whatever the colliders bring back from their 'Eden'."

"I fear no witch doctors," Zosimus said. "I am guided by *Suku*."

"They worship something far different," Andrei said, shaking his head. He walked across the room and pointed the flashlight at a map pinned to the back wall of the chamber. Multiple levels of the building were depicted on the schematics; everything was labeled in English with Portuguese translations. Andrei muttered wordlessly to himself as he pored over the different levels of the Axis Mundi station. He pointed the flashlight to an adjacent map depicting the topography of the greater landscape, the New Fátima region.

"I'll be damned," Andrei mumbled. "It looks like Axis Mundi has both a Uranium ore mine and a Uranium processing plant on the other side of Mount Chrysopoeia. If either of the world superpowers have access to nonradioactive antimatter nukes, there would be no reason for either side to hold back in a global fight..."

Andrei tore the map of the complex from the wall and pored over its details. He pointed to a door across the room and started walking. Zosimus sidled up to the doorway with the M60 pressed to his cheek. He aimed the rifle down a dim concrete hallway that stretched the entire length of the building. Bulletproof-glass windows lined the right-wall; portholes to view the chamber that held the collider. There were numerous doors along the left-hand wall. Zosimus glanced at the row of doorways and turned his attention to one of the portholes. After wiping away the film of condensation, Zosimus was able to see the collider through the glass.

Zosimus peered through the moldy porthole window and stared at the incomprehensible remains of the collider. The pieces of the particle accelerator that hadn't been destroyed in the implosion were scattered in a burnt-up ring within the gargantuan chamber. A massive breach in the ceiling poured evening sunlight into the center of the cratered cement floor. Several stray piles of brush had seemingly sprouted in the eye of the glowing halo. Andrei stood beside Zosimus, adjusting his glasses as he looked over the butchered remains of the apparatus. He nodded approvingly.

"Almost looks better than mine," Andrei said. "Almost."

"I think we're alone," Zosimus said. "No utahraptors; no Pardus."

Zosimus turned away from the window and stared down the hallway. The corridor ended in the far corner, where it turned into another perpendicular hallway that spanned the width of the building.

Zosimus noticed that there were dimly lit strobes blinking lethargically over each of the doors that lined the left-hand side of the dark hall. He went to the first door he saw and nodded to the light overhead.

"There's power," Zosimus said. "There might be a working radio connected to the mainframe, or something more reliable than a field radio. If we can't get the tracking beacon from Pardus, we may be able to find you a different way home, Doctor Wynn."

"Home?" Andrei grunted. "I haven't known a home since 'Nam."

"Home is just a concept," Zosimus said. He remembered the butchered remains of the bronze *Antonio da Silva Porto* statue lying outside of the City Hall in Kuito. Zosimus had always loathed living in Kuito, back when it was known as Silva Porto. "Home is wherever you can find food, water, or shelter, *irmão*. You can live anywhere, so long as you're content with at least living like an animal."

“That’s all we are, comrade,” Andrei said. “If I’ve learned anything, it’s that we’re all the same as the chimps, the bonobos, the baboons—hell, even the utahraptors. To me, Nguyen is no different than Xipetotec. Syd could have killed Captain Wise on a mission gone wrong just as easily as the Goliath had. After the past few days, all I can hope for is to find some people that won’t threaten my life or throw me into another war-torn shithole.”

Andrei paused mid-step. “No offense, bounty hunter.”

“That’s *all* anybody can hope for,” Zosimus said. He stepped inside of a room, scanning the darkness for a radio. Andrei stepped up behind him and swung the flashlight beam at the shadows in the corners. They saw that there wasn’t anything of use, so they walked back into the hallway, moving to the next doorway. Inside of the next room they found what appeared to be a control console; a panel mounted to the wall with an array of switches and dials. Andrei placed the flashlight on the console and flipped a few levers.

“Nothings working,” Andrei said. “Just the emergency lights.”

Zosimus rubbed the curling whiskers sprouting from his jaw as he stepped out of the room. As he glanced through a window at the collider, he dimly wondered what the Americans had intended for the space-age technology. He still couldn’t comprehend what the machine was capable of, despite what Andrei had told him of its use.

How humans could have gone from living in villages to altering reality at its base form was beyond Zosimus’s grasp. The fact that a cold war had erupted between the two superpowers of the world because of these ‘colliders’ seemed like a nightmarish fantasy to him. He would gladly give up civilization to avoid being pulled into another pitiful and meaningless conflict.

Zosimus wiped away the greasy coat of mold that had grown over the window so he could see the collider more clearly. From his position, he could see directly into the center of the apparatus, which was bathed in light from the collapsed ceiling. A mound of foliage was nestled in the middle of the collider; water droplets trickled from the shattered ceiling onto the vegetation. Zosimus cocked his head, curious of how something could have grown so quickly in the facility. He had assumed the site had only been abandoned for a few weeks... A reptilian head unfurled from the bush, the feather-wrapped neck raising high so the creature could face the sun hanging overhead. The jaws of the mother *caudapavonis* utahraptor parted and released a hiss that was muffled through the glass. A couple infant utahraptors, like chickens with the snouts of crocodiles, hopped out from under their mother and scampered around her body.

The mother utahraptor grunted at the chicks, spreading her arms to pull them back into the safety of her embrace. Zosimus almost felt a

semblance of empathy for the lone mother. He thought of the maternal giraffatitan, the elephants of his dreams, and his own mother lying dead beside the waterfall of Mount Chrysopoeia...

The mother utahraptor looked over her shoulder at Zosimus.

Zosimus gasped and jumped back from the window, nearly dropping the M60 in his shock. Andrei stepped out of the control room and opened his mouth to speak, but Zosimus grabbed him and planted a hand over his mouth. When Zosimus pointed at the window, Andrei went rigid with terror. The two men backed away from the window, looking from one end of the corridor to the other.

Zosimus let go of Andrei and peered through the windows, attempting to find a way where the utahraptor could enter the hallway they were in. He saw none, and he exhaled slowly. The mother utahraptor was clearly aggravated, barking out through the opening in the front of the building. The male utahraptors would be back soon; Zosimus was sure of it.

"Come on," Zosimus said, slapping Andrei on the shoulder. "Go find a radio. I'll keep my eyes on her. I'll let you know if the rest of the pack or Pardus arrives."

Andrei nodded and ran to the next door, pulling it open with a renewed sense of urgency. Zosimus continued to watch the mother utahraptor as she paced around the remains of the collider. She occasionally glanced back at Zosimus, screeching at him with her feathers bristling out like spears of trident grass. Zosimus clutched the M60 in one hand and felt the window beneath his palm, testing the strength of the glass. He would have opened fire on the mother if he could, but he didn't want to risk getting hit by his own ricocheting bullets.

The mother utahraptor stepped away from her chicks, and Zosimus saw the mangled bodies of Lalo and Thanatos lying in the center of the nest. Their abdomens had been ripped open, and most of the organs within had already been pecked clean. Zosimus became paralyzed as he remembered the entrails spilling from his beheaded mother's womb. He could almost feel the talons of the utahraptor slicing through his own gut. He kept his eyes on the bodies of Lalo and Thanatos and shouted over his shoulder, "Hurry, *irmão*!" "Cyka blyat, calm down," Andrei shouted back. "I'm looking."

Zosimus was silent, watching the mother utahraptor with his heartbeat pounding in his ears. He could see the silhouetted bodies of the male utahraptors standing before the breach in the building's façade. The *caudapavonis* alpha male ran forward first, followed by Xipetotec. The mother utahraptor immediately went into a defensive posture upon seeing Xipetotec, raising her tail like a flag with both forearms spread wide. The alpha male *caudapavonis* utahraptor

whimpered, trying to calm his mate. The mother utahraptor quieted down and sat back onto Lalo's corpse, wrapping her arms around her chicks.

Xipetotec lifted his head to face Zosimus. The predator's shaggy head puffed up as it released a powerful roar that made the windows shake. Zosimus stepped back from the porthole, his eyes brimming wide. He held the M60 before himself like a shield as he backed into the room that Andrei was in. He stepped into the darkness and knelt down beside the scientist. The metallic taste of blood was on his tongue.

Zosimus whispered, "The utahraptors are back."

A door creaked open down the hall. Zosimus stared at Andrei.

"Can they open doors?"

"No," Andrei whispered, shaking his head. "That's ridiculous."

Zosimus and Andrei locked eyes as a familiar voice called to them.

"Come on out, Doctor Wynn. Isla Olympus awaits us." CHAPTER THIRTY- CONFRONTING THE SHADOW

The soft boot-steps echoing down the hallway resounded through Zosimus's mind like an alarm. He pressed his body flat against the grime-covered floor and laid motionless in the shadows. The room was no larger than a storage closet; there was nowhere to hide. Zosimus knew he needed to get the drop on Pardus. If he could just aim the M60 down the hall and catch Pardus in his sights, a single tug on the trigger would end the problem entirely. Andrei was cowering in the darkness behind Zosimus, the .45 revolver shaking in his hand.

Zosimus waved his hand and Andrei shut off the flashlight. The dull tapping of Pardus's boots against the concrete gradually rose in volume. Zosimus could hear the dirt being scraped beneath the soles of Pardus's boots, the low hiss of his breath like that of a boomslang. Zosimus clutched the M60, willing himself to move. He was an easy target in the tiny enclosure; Zosimus didn't want to risk missing the first shot if Pardus stepped into the room.

"Come on out, Doctor Wynn," Pardus called. His emotionless voice slid down the corridor at a syrupy pace. "There's nobody left to get in our way; we can get out of here safely to Isla Olympus, no problem. A private jet is waiting for us on a tarmac outside of Kuito right now. If we don't hurry, Flores's Cuban comrades are going to find us here. But don't worry about those savages that killed Kinane; I burned their village to the ground."

Zosimus felt a surge of panic and anger, but he fought to quell it. He desperately hoped that Pardus was lying about the *Onjoi* village, but he couldn't deny the possibility. Zosimus tightened his hands around the M60 and slowly inched closer to the open doorway. The sickly white light mounted over the door barely cut into the shadows within

the corridor. Zosimus couldn't hear the utahraptors; he wasn't sure which would be worse to be cornered by, Xipetotec or Pardus. Zosimus heard the *whang* of a door being kicked in and flinched. He held his breath and listened as Pardus's boots clicked their way into one of the rooms further down the hall. Zosimus slowly peered around the corner of the doorframe and pointed the M60 down the corridor. He saw Pardus stepping inside of the first room that he had searched with Andrei. Zosimus aimed the M60 at the doorway, waiting for Pardus to exit the room.

"Come on out, Doctor Wynn," Pardus's voice echoed dully. "We've both been in this position before. We're like brothers; we're both bastards of our motherlands; orphans of war. Russia didn't want you; Vietnam didn't want me; the United States didn't care about either of us. If it weren't for your grandfather, I would still be a slave to General Jericho. Mr. Aquino paid for me to come all this way just bring you back home. The city that Ordo Ouroboros built on Isla Olympus will be the only motherland to return to during the Aeon of Ouroboros."

Pardus stepped into the corridor, his M16 raised.

Zosimus pointed the M60 between Pardus's eyes.

"*Irmão*," Pardus exclaimed, lowering the rifle. "You're alive!"

Zosimus pulled the M60's trigger and the gun clicked; jammed.

Pardus scowled and raised his M16, firing a volley of shots that screamed down the hallway, ricocheting across the concrete walls and bulletproof porthole windows. Zosimus recoiled into the room that Andrei was hiding in and pressed his back against the wall. He dug his finger into the M60's dust cover, clawing at a trapped shell casing. Several bullets clipped at the frame of the doorway as Zosimus desperately fought with the jammed rifle.

Zosimus ducked a ricocheting bullet and cursed beneath his breath, tossing the M60 aside in disgust. Zosimus looked at Andrei and waved his hand. Andrei raised his revolver, but Zosimus motioned for him to lay down. He withdrew his kukri machete and turned back to the doorway. Zosimus raised the blade above his head as he listened to Pardus's approaching footsteps.

"You're just like us, bounty hunter," Pardus said. "The Portuguese didn't care about you, did they? You were just another worthless native to them; a primitive ape dragged into their industrial war machine. Just like my old employer, General Jericho, dragged me out of my village and into this business of blood-letting for bureaucrats. We have the same background, *irmão*. We're practically brothers." Zosimus's fingernails buried into the handle of his kukri.

"This land isn't your home," Pardus barked. "Isn't that what you said? You have no loyalty to this place, to the people, to the government.

We can help Ordo Ouroboros make a better world for people like us, for all of the orphaned bastards of this whore we call 'mother earth'. With our experiences, we can make sure that no more people die in another fruitless war. All it takes is setting up the final battle for mankind to fight...one last world war to end all conflicts."

"Lies," Andrei shouted from his corner of the room. "All lies!"

Zosimus shot Andrei a stern look, but Andrei waved him away.

"Run," Andrei whispered. "I'll distract him."

Zosimus nodded to Andrei, then turned back to the doorway.

The stock of an M16 cracked against the side of Zosimus's head and he hit the floor. Pardus stepped inside and fired a round at the floor, but Zosimus rolled out of the way, scrambling out the door. Pardus spun out of the doorway and fired several shots after the bounty hunter, but Zosimus was already gone. Pardus cursed and lowered the M16. He had seen the abandoned M60; he knew the bounty hunter was unarmed. Pardus would return for the Angolan rat after he subdued the scientist.

Andrei was crouched in the darkness, aiming the .45 revolver in his trembling hands at the back of Pardus's head. Andrei had never taken a life; he wasn't even sure if he could bring himself to do it. He was trying to control his breathing, struggling to steady his arms, as Pardus paced around the room with the M16. A whimper escaped Andrei's lips, and he almost dropped the revolver to cover his mouth. Pardus's eyes flashed like flames as they focused on Andrei.

Andrei immediately pulled the revolver's trigger and missed. The bullet struck the wall beside Pardus's head and ricocheted wildly across the room. Pardus ducked and weaved through the shadows towards the scientist. Andrei fired four more rounds as Pardus's silhouette streaked towards him. Andrei saw a boot blurring through the air and dropped the revolver to cover his face. Pardus kicked Andrei in the base of his neck, throwing the gaunt Russian to the concrete floor.

Pardus punted the revolver out of the way and grabbed Andrei by his throat, lifting him off of the floor. Andrei threw his fists out and swung his bony elbows, but Pardus effortlessly dodged each blow as he withdrew the ka-bar from his belt. Andrei lifted his head just as the blade plunged through his shoulder and buried into the wall behind him. Pardus tightened his grip around Andrei's throat until his screams of pain became a hissing choke. The Vietnamese mercenary's face was bathed in darkness as he stared into Andrei's eyes.

"Vulture Squad died for you," Pardus hissed. "This is for Miller."

Andrei was lost in Pardus's bottomless eyes. He could feel the darkness in Pardus's pupils dragging him into a black, empty void.

Pardus withdrew his ka-bar slowly, allowing it to scrape across Andrei's clavicle bone. Andrei squealed, but the sound was trapped in

the base of his neck, just below Pardus's tightening hand. Andrei saw Pardus as a living embodiment of shadow. The Vietnamese mercenary was studying Andrei as though he were an insect beneath his boot. Pardus tugged the kabar out of Andrei's shoulder and threw him to the floor. Andrei immediately screamed as blood began to drain from his *trapezius* muscle. His left arm hung uselessly at his side, paralyzed. Pardus stepped over Andrei and kicked him swiftly in the bottom of his chest. Andrei shrieked as his floating ribs snapped like sapling twigs beneath Pardus's boot. Andrei howled in agony as Pardus climbed on top of him. Andrei grasped at Pardus's ka-bar, but only succeeded in pulling the Ordo Ouroboros pendant free from its hilt. Pardus growled, "You started all of this, back in Vietnam."

Andrei begged without words as Pardus started swinging. The young mercenary's fists pulverized the scientist's solar plexus. Andrei vomited and rolled over while Pardus shoved his face into the purged bile. Pardus slammed Andrei's head against the cement floor, digging his fingers into the scientist's scalp until his nails drew blood. He dragged his claws down the back of Andrei's skull, splitting the skin open. Pardus cracked Andrei's head one last time against the cement floor and sat back, panting as a crimson puddle slowly grew beneath them.

"Mr. Aquino wanted you alive," Pardus said. "But not your father. I hope Zosimus told you about how he killed the simpering mutt with his machete; all for money. And one last secret, between you and me, Dr. Wynn— when I return to Isla Olympus, I'm going to kill your grandfather and take my seat at the throne of humanity's final kingdom. Ordo Ouroboros will be my inheritance, not yours. Your collider destroyed my motherland— I deserve yours."

Pardus reached down and felt Andrei's pulse, grunted, and took his hand away. Pardus slipped the ka-bar back into its sheath and scooped his M16 off of the bloody floor. He stepped over Andrei's limp body and exited the room with the M16 raised. Pardus glanced up and down the corridor; the Ovimbundu bounty hunter could be in any of the rooms. There were at least two dozen doorways in the hallway alone.

"Come on, bounty hunter," Pardus whispered, just loud enough to be heard. "Doctor Wynn is dead. You've got nothing left, Zosimus. No friends; no family; no villages to hide in; no motherland to return to. Just come out now and we can settle this peacefully. I can put you under quickly; you don't have to suffer like Andrei did. Like your *'irmão'* Josef did. I know killing can be an act of mercy, when its done to end suffering. I know you're suffering, Zosimus. I know we share the same nightmares."

Zosimus was crouching in a room at the opposite end of the corridor,

facing the hallway that ran perpendicular to the collider. At the other end of the hallway, a *caudapavonis* utahraptor was vigorously sniffing the floor. The nostril on the end of the dinosaur's snout flexed as it inhaled. The utahraptor raised its head and growled, its eyes glowing luminescent like full yellow moons. Zosimus felt his stomach somersault as the utahraptor curled its lips back, baring its fangs at him from the darkness.

Zosimus raised his machete as the utahraptor charged, the feathers on its body bristling like foliage whipped up by the wind. The utahraptor raced down the hallway with astonishing speed, boring down on Zosimus so quickly that it appeared to grow tenfold in the narrow corridor. Zosimus dropped the machete and grabbed the door in both hands, slamming it shut just as the *caudapavonis* utahraptor crashed into it from the other side.

Zosimus was thrown backwards as the door flew open, struck the wall and swung back. The *caudapavonis* utahraptor staggered into the room, dragging its claws across the ground to slow its momentum. Zosimus slid across the cement, rolled onto his stomach, and skittered out of the room on his hands and feet. The *caudapavonis* utahraptor turned and howled at Zosimus's backside, spreading its feathered forearms. Zosimus dove out into the hallway and bullets shrieked down the corridor, striking the floor around him.

Pardus sprinted down the hallway, firing at Zosimus with his M16. The *caudapavonis* utahraptor stepped out into the hallway, snarling as it turned to face Pardus. A few bullets struck the side of the utahraptor's mane and it ducked away, hissing with a mixture of agitation and confusion. Pardus fired a few more rounds and hit the utahraptor directly in its eye socket. The utahraptor collapsed to the ground, kicking its legs and shrieking in the throes of death. Pardus stepped over the utahraptor's body and fired three more rounds directly into its skull, quelling the creature's seizures.

"I know no fear," Pardus howled, looking down the hallway where Zosimus had fled. "You're cowards, all of you! You're all so weak, so easy to control. Josef was the easiest of them all. He didn't even have to be persuaded with fear; he only lived for himself, for the money I had promised to you and him. Josef helped me destroy that village for *gold*, Zosimus. He killed those people for *you*, for *money*, for what your motherland did to *you*."

Zosimus lay in the shadows of a room, his machete tight in hand.

"Come on out, Zosimus," Pardus said. "What are you afraid of?"

Zosimus watched as Pardus's boots stepped past his doorway.

"*Nothing*," Zosimus whispered. "*I move through fear.*"

Zosimus grabbed Pardus's legs and swiped the machete across the back of his boots, slicing through the fabric and severing the flesh

beneath. The kukri blade cut through the tendons in Pardus's ankles and he fell to the floor screaming. The partially-amputated feet lolled on the ends of Pardus's legs as he kicked and wailed in pain.

"Bastard!" Pardus screamed, crawling across the floor. "Savage!"

Zosimus climbed on top of Pardus just as the barrel of the M16 met his sternum. Pardus pulled the trigger, but there was only the *click* of an empty magazine. Zosimus tossed the M16 aside and stepped off of Pardus as the ka-bar whipped past his neck. Pardus's hair hung over his face, masking the crazed look in his eyes as he swung the dagger through the air.

"Come back!" Pardus shrieked. He attempted to stand, but his feet rolled beneath his lacerated ankles, sending him face-first to the floor. He screeched like a wounded baboon as he dragged himself towards Zosimus. The ka-bar clattered against the concrete.

"Fucking *coward*," Pardus hissed. "I own you, *African!*"

Zosimus didn't bother to look over his shoulder.

"Goodbye, *ondele*."

Zosimus walked down the hallway as Pardus's screams echoed after him. He stepped inside of the room where Andrei had been hiding, and he found the wounded scientist slumped against the wall. Zosimus knelt beside him and felt his pulse; it was weak, but it was there. He slapped Andrei gently across the face.

Andrei blinked and moaned, "Five more minutes, comrade."

"Time to go," Zosimus said. He helped Andrei to his feet and checked his wounds; most of the injuries were non-lethal, but certainly agonizingly painful. Zosimus let go of his breath as he slung Andrei's limp arm over his shoulder. "You're lucky to be alive, *irmão*."

"That's what I've been told," Andrei huffed, wincing. "I'm not sure I believe it...but I've...been wrong...before."

Zosimus grunted as he set Andrei down in the doorway. He looked down the corridor and saw that Pardus was still dragging himself after them. A wide brush-stroke of blood marked his trail. Zosimus walked over, kicked the ka-bar from Pardus's hand, and reached down to check his pockets. Pardus grabbed at the bounty hunter's throat, but Zosimus planted his knee in the back of the mercenary's neck, pinning him to the floor.

"Get off," Pardus croaked. "I'll kill you-"

"*Sim*," Zosimus grunted. He found the tracking device in Pardus's jacket and raised it above his head. A hiss seeped from further down the corridor, and Zosimus looked up to see Xipetotec sniffing the slain *caudapavonis* utahraptor. Xipetotec narrowed his milky eyes at Zosimus and spread his scarred jaws, filling the corridor with a rapacious scream. Zosimus jumped off of Pardus and turned to run, but Pardus grabbed him by the belt and pulled him to the floor.

Zosimus tried to break away from Pardus, but even in his wounded state, Pardus was as strong as a leopard.

Pardus climbed onto Zosimus and wrapped his arms around his neck. Zosimus fought desperately to get out of Pardus's embrace, but the mercenary couldn't be bucked. Pardus squeezed the air out of Zosimus's throat with a grip as strong as a dying anaconda.

"We die together," Pardus hissed into Zosimus's ear. "Three bastards dying together, with no home to return to but oblivion; nonexistence; the Ouroboros of time."

Zosimus could hear Xipetotec charging down the hallway, the impact of the utahraptor's feet pounding against the concrete. Pardus was panting down Zosimus's neck, squeezing tighter and tighter until his nails drew blood. Andrei was screaming down the hallway, but Zosimus couldn't comprehend his words. He craned his head back, fighting against Pardus's weight, and he read Andrei's lips just as the word came to fruition in his mind.

"*Duck!*" Andrei screamed.

Zosimus dropped his head as Andrei fired his .45 revolver. The bullet slammed through Pardus's shoulder and he let go of Zosimus with a scream of pain. Zosimus scrambled out from under Pardus just as Xipetotec pounced. The utahraptor sailed through the air, its arms spread wide, the killing talons on its feet flexing forward. Zosimus dove across the floor and grabbed his kukri, rolling to his feet. Xipetotec slammed down on top of Pardus, and its scything toe-claws plunged through the base of his spine.

Zosimus clambered back to his feet and sprinted down the hallway to Andrei. He looked over his shoulder when he heard Pardus's agonized screams. Xipetotec was ravenously tearing apart Pardus's body with its foreclaws, stripping flesh from bone with each swipe of its talons. Blood sprayed through the air, casting crimson mandalas across the porthole windows. Zosimus stared dimly as the utahraptor snapped its jaws around Pardus's neck and wrenched him backward.

Zosimus could hear the utahraptor fracturing the vertebrae in Pardus's spine as it folded him backwards, in half. Pardus's screams segued into projectile vomiting, and burgundy bile jettisoned from his gaping mouth. Xipetotec reached down and slid its claws through Pardus's throat, splitting the flesh down to the spinal chord. Pardus's screams became a gurgling choke as the utahraptor snapped its talons through the base of his neck, severing his head completely.

Zosimus watched as Xipetotec lifted Pardus's head in its blackened jaws and shook it like a dog, splashing streams of scarlet onto the mildewed cement. Zosimus continued to stare, repulsed yet incapable of looking away, until Andrei slapped him on the back of the head.

"*Cyka blyat,*" Andrei screamed. "*Run, bounty hunter! Run!*"

Zosimus snapped back to reality and pulled Andrei to his feet, stumbling down the hallway. Xipetotec dropped Pardus's severed head and shrieked at the fleeing pair. A *citrinitas* utahraptor stepped into the corridor from around the opposite corner, followed by another. The three utahraptors screeched and sprinted down the hallway after Zosimus and Andrei, trampling Pardus's corpse in the process. Zosimus's bare feet slipped across the bloody floor as he dragged Andrei to the door where they had first entered the corridor. The utahraptors were approaching quickly, galloping after them. Andrei was muttering something into Zosimus's ear, but his words were lost in the utahraptors' cacophony of stamping feet, snarling, and screaming. Zosimus felt the utahraptors' breath on his backside as his coursing adrenaline propelled him through the doorway and into the darkness of the room beyond.

Zosimus kicked the door shut behind him and pressed his body against it, feeling for any available locks. He could hear the utahraptors through the metal, rapidly approaching, as he found a bolt beneath his trembling hand. He grabbed the bolt and locked it, then found another and snapped it in place. The door was struck with a powerful impact, and Zosimus was thrown to the floor.

The door shuddered, the hinges groaning as the utahraptors scraped their claws and kicked their feet against the thin metal. Zosimus pushed himself off of the wall and grabbed Andrei by his shirt collar, pulling him back to his feet. He dragged Andrei out of the room, into the front office that led outside. Zosimus kicked the second door shut behind them and locked it as well. He pressed his ear against the door and heard the utahraptors breaking into the previous room. The utahraptors sounded like they were knocking over tables and chairs in their voracious search for the humans trespassing upon their territory. Zosimus walked across the room and pulled open the front door to peer outside. He poked his head out and looked around, scanning the clearing. He could see a *citrinitas* utahraptor standing beside the overturned truck, looking around in agitated excitement. The utahraptor looked in Zosimus's direction and he slammed the door shut. The utahraptors in the previous room were already kicking at the other door, attempting to break inside.

"Mount Chrysopoeia," Zosimus said to Andrei. "Can you climb?"

"I can...try not to fall..." Andrei wheezed. "Why?"

Zosimus walked over and pulled Andrei upright. "There's a utahraptor outside, but I'll take care of it. If we can get to the waterfall, we can climb up and wait for the evac. We can't stay here any longer."

"An astute...observation..." Andrei coughed.

"Damned communists," Zosimus grunted, heaving Andrei's arm over his shoulder. He felt around his web belt and found a grenade, then

pulled the pin with his teeth. He helped Andrei over to the door and shook him. "Grab the door."

"I'll do my best," Andrei muttered. He pawed at the handle, felt it, and held it tight. "Ready when you are, comrade."

The utahraptors were slamming against the door behind them, snapping the bolt in half. The door uttered an exhausted groan as it folded inward, and Zosimus saw Xipetotec's scarred snout gnawing at the hinges. He turned back to the door leading outside and spat out the grenade pin.

"Open it," Zosimus said.

Andrei tugged on the handle and the door swung open. Zosimus kicked it open the rest of the way, and the intense sunlight needled into his eyes. He squinted, trying to see the shape of the utahraptor outside amongst the globules of color dancing through his vision. Zosimus heard the utahraptor scream and saw its shape standing before the truck, the shaggy back arched to pounce. Zosimus heaved the grenade across the clearing and heard the little metal ball land in the bed of the truck. The utahraptor looked over its shoulder with a confused hiss.

The grenade erupted and the truck's reservoir of fuel ignited, creating a screaming ball of fire that blossomed throughout the clearing. The flames caught the utahraptor by its pelt and burning oil coated its body. The feathers on the utahraptor's body instantly ignited, immolating the animal. The utahraptor's screams tore through Zosimus's ears just as the other door crashed open behind him.

Zosimus dragged Andrei outside and moved as quickly as he could to the waterfall. The three utahraptors that had been pursuing him stopped in the doorway, alarmed by the sight and screams of their burning packmate. The rest of the pack ran out and danced around the blazing beast, barking and squealing for their howling, agonized kin. While they were distracted, Zosimus staggered with Andrei to the base of the waterfall. They ducked their heads beneath the crashing water and collapsed against the slate wall.

Zosimus scanned the rock wall, looking for handholds. He had climbed it countless times before as a child. He remembered the day of his mother's death, when he had tried to prove his warrior's heart by scaling the buttress free-handed. The emergent memory rendered Zosimus immobile with fear. He stared at the towering cliff-face, suddenly unsure of himself.

"Climb," Andrei grunted. "Don't be afraid."

Zosimus nodded shakily and looked over his shoulder. The three utahraptors were communicating with the rest of the pack, which had assembled around their dying kin. The screams of the burning utahraptor had ceased, but its charred body continued to writhe

simply across the cindered mulch. Xipetotec looked up from the fallen pack-mate at Zosimus and howled vehemently. The alpha male utahraptor understood the pain of fire and sought the death of any sapiens that brought such suffering to its kin.

Zosimus found a handhold and started climbing. He pulled Andrei up beside him, guiding him. Andrei could only climb with one arm, as the other hung dead at his side from blood loss. The water rolled down their backsides, and Zosimus felt the rock sliding beneath his fingertips as he pulled himself higher. Xipetotec ran to the base of the waterfall and snapped at Zosimus's legs, hopping higher to reach him. Zosimus smacked Andrei on the back, pushing him further up. The other utahraptors gathered in a ring below them, their heads tilted back to avoid the spraying water.

Zosimus felt a rush of wind against his back, and he looked over his shoulder to see Xipetotec lunging for his boots. Zosimus swung his legs out of the way as the utahraptor snapped its jaws shut, snagging the soiled fabric of his filthy khaki pants. Xipetotec's fangs ripped cleanly through the cloth and the animal fell to the base of the waterfall, landing nimbly on the slick slate stones. The force of the bite made Zosimus lose his grip, and he slipped down the sloping rock wall.

Zosimus screamed as he clawed for purchase. He grabbed onto a root creeping out from between the fractured slate and jerked to a stop. His legs swung free and his other hand fell away from its hold. He dangled by one hand from the root. He clenched his jaw with effort, feeling the moistened bark slipping beneath his fingernails. Zosimus cried out fearfully and looked down; the *citrinitas* and *caudapavonis* utahraptors were eagerly snapping their jaws below.

"Grab on," Andrei shouted, reaching down with his limp arm.

Zosimus clawed for Andrei's hand, his legs kicking free.

Xipetotec leapt onto the wall beside Zosimus, its claws buried in the rock. Zosimus turned to see the utahraptor's blistered snout inches from his face. A venomous snarl seethed through the utahraptor's cracked lips. The utahraptor's body was being struck by the waterfall, crashing over its wiry amber pelt. Zosimus let go of Andrei's hand, grabbed his machete, and swung it at Xipetotec.

Xipetotec reared his head back, and the full force of the waterfall struck the utahraptor's chest. Xipetotec fell down screaming from the cliff and plummeted to the pool below. Zosimus watched as the utahraptor crashed into the stream. He looked up and saw Andrei's arm still hanging in front of his face. Zosimus took Andrei's arm and pulled himself up, grabbing onto a hanging ficus root.

Zosimus climbed past Andrei and dragged himself over the ledge at the top of the cliff. He knelt down and grabbed Andrei by the

shoulders, heaving Andrei up with all of his remaining strength. The two men fell back on top of the buttress, landing on their backs against the soft, sun-bathed soil. Zosimus sat upright and looked down the waterfall at the utahraptors, which were helping Xipetotec back to the shore. The soaked alpha male looked like a freshly bathed chicken; Zosimus couldn't help but laugh as Xipetotec grimaced in disdain.

"My god," Zosimus coughed. "We made it, *irmão*."

Andrei tugged on Zosimus's arm. "We have company, comrade."

Zosimus looked over his shoulder and saw several Cuban soldiers aiming their AK47's at him and Andrei from the undergrowth. One of the Cubans stepped up to Zosimus, angling a shotgun between his eyes. The Cuban with the shotgun was a doppelganger of Lalo Flores, but with an older, more wrinkled face. His sunken eyes showed a decade's worth of insomnia. He tapped his finger against the trigger of the shotgun as the rest of the soldiers circled Zosimus and Andrei.

"Goddamned communists," Zosimus sighed. "God damn them all."

ANIMUS INDIVIDUATION PHASE V DISPLACEMENT

untamed and insatiable."

"The inverse of Animus Integration is Animus Displacement. By rejecting the masculine complexes and archetypes, control over these elements are lost. This is the ultimate fear of man; the unstoppable destroyer, the rage

– Dr. Bruno Moreno

"Understanding does not cure evil, but it is a definite help, inasmuch as one can cope with a comprehensible darkness."

– Carl G. Jung

or any single good trait? Why am I what I am?"

"Is it unnatural that I should have absorbed these things and have become what I am today – a treacherous, degenerate, brutal human savage – devoid of all decent feelings, without conscience, morals, pity, sympathy, principle,

– Carl Panzram

"Everybody I've ever loved...dead...every home I've ever known is now rubble...my dreams have been incinerated through the boiling point of this infernal cold war."

– Captain Bruno Moreno

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE– EXTERMINATE ALL THE BRUTES

The sun fell behind Mount Chrysopoeia's crenulated peaks as the Cuban BRDM-2's followed a clear-cut path through the forest. Andrei was unconscious, strapped to a litter as *El León's* medic stitched the knife wound on his shoulder. Zosimus was sitting in the seat beside Andrei's gurney with his hands bound behind his back. Bruno Moreno, the captain of *El Leóns*, kept a pistol aimed between the bounty hunter's eyes. Bruno cocked back the hammer of his Makarov and smiled grimly at Zosimus. The rest of the *Leóns* on board were silent; Zosimus could tell something was troubling them, but he wasn't sure of what.

"Tell me your name," Bruno said. "And the Russian's as well."

Zosimus took a deep breath through his flaring nostrils. "My name is Zosimus Kaikara. I am a member of the *Onjoi* tribe. They are Ovimbundu; native to this region. I was simply helping this man, Andrei Wynn, to find a way home. He was lost from his team and desperately hurt. That is all I can tell you, *camarada*. I just want to be back with my people. I'm afraid they may be in danger."

Bruno leaned back, resting the pistol on his knee.

"We know of the *Onjoi* people, but we have yet to make contact with them," Bruno said. "Are you aware of the *Ocimbondo* tribe? They were allied with the MPLA rebels here in New Fátima. We were with the *Ocimbondo* tribe and their MPLA contacts when they first observed the truck being used by this white man's team. If these men are responsible for halting the MPLA's attack, it must be safe to assume they were also responsible for destroying the *Ocimbondo* village."

Bruno rested the barrel of his Makarov against Andrei's temple.

"I am not a bad man, despite what the Portuguese would tell you,"

Bruno slowly drawled. "I do not want to hurt either you or your *camarada*; however, I will dispense justice if no one else will. If this man is not complicit in the massacre that happened two nights ago, you better say so now, *Senor Kaikara*."

Zosimus shook his head without breaking eye contact with Bruno.

"Tell me the truth," Bruno said, leaning closer. "Why are you here?" Zosimus spat on the floor of the grumbling BRDM-2. "I was paid by the United States and the Portuguese loyalists in Kuito to lead this man, Andrei Wynn, and his *camarada* through the New Fátima region. They were attempting to locate this 'Axis Mundi' facility on Mount Chrysopoeia so they could destroy it. According to Doctor Wynn, the Americans and Portuguese were attempting to cover-up their mistake that led to the presence of the dinosaurs here."

"Why would they ask the help of an *Onjoiwarrior*?" Bruno grunted. "I was a bounty hunter," Zosimus said. "A '*Jackal of Angola*'." Bruno raised his eyebrows and took the pistol away from Andrei's head. "I knew you looked familiar, bounty hunter. I had never known your names, but I heard the legends of the *Jackals of Angola*. You killed many of our *camarada*, both Cuban and Angolan alike, over the past decade. I can't begin to imagine the amount of people you had killed when you were still in the *Cacadores Especies*."

"I choose not to imagine it," Zosimus said. "I am *Onjoinow*."

"So this man; *SenorWynn*," Bruno said. "He was a member of Stalker Force. I never would have thought Stalker Force could have been capable of such a disaster as we saw two nights ago. Where is our *camarada*, *Senor Flores*? Why didn't he do anything to stop the massacre? For that matter, why did you do nothing, *hermano*? Do you have any idea how many people died in that village?"

"Stalker Force was innocent," Zosimus said. "It was a spy named Nguyen Con Giap. He was responsible for the sabotage of this particle accelerator in New Fátima. He led half of our team to attack the village just to divide us. Lalo and I would have stopped them if we could. Lalo was murdered by these men, and I murdered them. I have brought justice to your *camarada*. Please show me the same justice."

"*Mierda*," Bruno huffed. "How can I trust you, bounty hunter?"

"Lalo Flores was a good man," Zosimus said, straightening up in his seat. "He tried to help me reach you and your team before he was murdered. I could even take you to where his body was left. Believe me, *camarada*. I would have done anything to save him, but I had been tied up by one of the murderers working for Nguyen. They are all dead now; only Doctor Wynn is alive, and he never harmed anybody. He is an innocent man."

"*SenorWynn* is complicit," Bruno said. He lit a cigar and sat back as the BRDM-2 bounced across half-buried roots and granite. "Lalo was spying on Stalker Force for Castro and the U.S.S.R. Because of their doomed relationship with the United States, the Soviets had no way of knowing anything about Stalker Force's progress with tracking the dinosaurs that originally escaped from Vietnam. Or information on DM-10, for that matter. Lalo was a doubleagent, but for good intentions."

"How is Doctor Wynn complicit in anything?" Zosimus asked.

"The destruction of vaccines," Bruno puffed. "For DM-10."

"Doctor Wynn said that is impossible," Zosimus said.

"Our scientists in Cuba found a way," Bruno exhaled. "Q.E.P.D"

"Q.E.P.D?" Zosimus repeated. "*Rest in Peace*, correct?"

"Si," Bruno sighed. "After hearing of the appearance of dinosaurs in New Fátima, we were sent the first trial vaccines to dispense to our

camarada in the MPLA. It may sound wrong, but they would have been our first test subjects. Our clinical trials in Cuba were successful. If it weren't for the current war between NATO and the USSR, we may have been able to dispense this vaccine to the world. But as far as any of us know, Cuba no longer exists."

Zosimus stared at Bruno in stupefied silence. "*Desculpe?*"

"You haven't heard the news?" Bruno asked.

Zosimus shook his head as Bruno exhaled a pungent cloud.

"It would seem that all of the Axis Mundi colliders on earth have been sabotaged," Bruno said, tamping the ash from his cigar. "That means in almost every industrialized western nation, these Axis Mundi facilities have been violently destroyed. Wormholes have opened, and dinosaurs have been seen on almost every country on earth. The same thing has been happening in Soviet nations, and each side pointed the finger at the other. The Third World War has begun, *Senor Kaikara*, and countries have already fallen...including my own motherland."

Bruno wiped his eyes; the pale incandescent light in the armored personnel carrier illuminated tears on his cheeks. Zosimus looked at the other *Leóns* and saw them nodding solemnly. A few of the men began to shake as they became overwhelmed with emotion. The soldier steering the BRDM-2 shuddered and wept, bent over at the wheel. Zosimus cleared his throat uncomfortably. One of the *Leóns* punched the roof of the vehicle and snapped, "*Asesinos! Los Americanos son asesinos!*"

"Cuba has been destroyed?" Zosimus whispered. "How?"

"Antimatter bombs," Bruno said. "Axis Mundi developed them."

"Solomon Aquino is still alive," Zosimus said. "He is responsible."

Bruno shook his head as the BRDM-2 slowed to a halt. "I am not sure how Solomon Aquino and Axis Mundi Corporation can be blamed for this war breaking out. It doesn't matter what businesses built the bombs that are destroying Cuba; the United States; Europe; the Soviet Union; too many nations to name. So long as the power of god exists in the hands of mankind, war will be an inevitable means to any ideological ends. Humanity is to blame for its own destruction, *Senor Kaikara*. It will always be that way."

"It's hard to believe," Zosimus muttered. "It feels like a dream."

"A nightmare, maybe," Bruno said, rising from his seat. He snuffed out the cigar against the metal ceiling and walked to the door. "But that is how it was always meant to be, ever since the detonation of the first atom bomb. '*For I am become death; the destroyer of worlds*', as *Senor Oppenheimer* was once quoted. Once man achieved godhood through these war-borne creations, we knew our next world war would happen as instantly as any god could wish. I had always known it would happen without a sign or sound of the destruction to come, but I knew

it would be such a judgement day; near instantaneous. *Santa Muerte* has long been waiting for this moment.”

Zosimus remained in his seat beside Andrei's stretcher as Bruno opened the cabin door. The six Cubans in the BRDM-2 exited to meet with the other six that had remained back at their base camp. Zosimus was still trying to process the information that Bruno had given him; he couldn't fathom the possibility of mushroom clouds rising above the superpowers of the world. By contrast, Angola seemed almost peaceful. If Zosimus had believed in what the missionaries had told him during boot camp, he may have accepted the Ordo Ouroboros ideals of creating a new heaven on earth through the ashes of the old world order. As far as Zosimus was concerned, his motherland was Edenic enough, even with the dinosaurs and rebels.

Zosimus imagined that *Suku's* nightmares were only beginning.

Bruno stood outside of the BRDM-2 and looked across the clearing where the Cuban base camp had been erected. The rough granite surface of Mount Chrysopoeia glistened like diamonds and gold beneath visible heat shimmers. The evening sun bled through the sky directly overhead, cooking the rocky floor beneath his boots. Bruno raised his stockless KS-23 shotgun as he slowly approached a fire-pit smoldering in the center of the campsite. The other five *Leóns* followed him in a diamond formation, their bayonetbearing AK-47's and SKS rifles leading the way. The BRDM-2 growled lowly as it idled in the shade of a mu'unze acacia.

Bruno held his breath as he stared down the barrel of his shotgun at what remained of the canvas tents that once surrounded the dying campfire. The torn white canvas was stained red and black, littered across the clearing. The wire skeletons of the tents lay scattered and twisted amongst the entrails of gutted sleeping bags. Bruno waved three of the *Leóns* to the second BRDM-2, lying on its side across the clearing. Bruno led the other two *Leóns* towards the remains of their team that had stayed behind to watch the campsite. It was difficult for Bruno to discern how many of his *Leóns* on guard duty had been killed; the only identifiable pieces left behind were severed limbs and masticated organ meat.

Bruno turned to face the other three *Leóns* that were investigating the overturned BRDM-2 across the clearing. One of the Cuban soldiers was dragging out a dead *León* by his arms; the carcass had been bisected at the waist. Bruno whistled to the three *Leóns* and waved for them to circle back. He couldn't fathom what animals in New Fátima could have killed the six *Leóns* so swiftly and savagely. Bruno remembered Lalo's prior dispatches about the utahraptors migrating south through

Zaire, but he had never seen any during his time in New Fátima.

The mountainside was silent as Bruno led the remaining five *Leóns* to their BRDM-2. None of the men spoke; with their country destroyed, six additional deaths were no more than a statistic. Bruno huffed as he cradled his KS-23 shotgun, glancing back and forth. There were no birds crying from the surrounding forest, nor did any baboons make their presence known as they watched from the acacia canopy. Bruno thought back to when he had first arrived in Angola a decade ago, and his worst fears had been the lions and leopards in the brush. He never expected that the nightmares Lalo had spoken of would become a part of his waking reality.

Bruno glanced at the tree line; the foliage shifted, then settled. The *León* at the rear of the group grunted as he hit the ground, simultaneously discharging a round from his AKM assault rifle. Bruno and the other *Leóns* dove out of the way as the fallen soldier screamed from behind. Bruno rolled to his back and sat upright, his shotgun raised, as the screaming *León* was dragged violently into the forest. Bruno pumped a slug into the chamber of his KS-23 as he stared at the bloody trail left behind. Claw-marks from the nails of the missing *León* outlined the drag-marks across the granite.

"*Mendoza*," one of the *Leóns* shouted. "*Mendoza, dónde estás!*"

"*Silencio*," Bruno hissed. "*Arriba, andale! Back to the APC!*"

The shadows of the surrounding acacias began to blur with movement as Bruno and the four remaining *Leóns* sprinted to the purring BRDM-2. The robust, mangey body of Xipetotec materialized through the tangled rhododendron behind the armored personnel carrier.

Bruno screamed and fired his shotgun, but the slug missed Xipetotec's head by an inch. The utahraptor shrieked and pounced over the vehicle, crashing into one of the *Leóns* beside Bruno.

Bruno stumbled and turned to fire his shotgun, but a second scream caused him to look to the adjacent end of the clearing. A *citrinitas* utahraptor streaked as a golden blur towards the Cuban captain. He fired his KS-23 at the approaching utahraptor as the *León* beneath Xipetotec was disemboweled. The three *Leóns* that were still alive turned and ran to the BRDM-2, leaving Bruno with Xipetotec and the charging *citrinitas* utahraptor. Bruno fired two more slugs from his shotgun, blowing apart the head of the tawny predator. He turned to fire at Xipetotec and dropped his shotgun, gawking at the ragged pit in the center of his fallen comrade's torso.

Xipetotec screamed at Bruno, spitting shreds of intestinal tissue.

Bruno charged towards the BRDM-2, swinging his arms as he ran.

Xipetotec screeched and raced after him as swiftly as a loping cheetah.

Bruno didn't dare look back, panting and crying out in mindless

terror. Two of the *Leóns* stopped at the doorway of the BRDM-2 and turned around, firing their AK47's at Xipetotec. The third *León* grabbed the handle of the armored personnel vehicle's side-hatch and tugged at it, whimpering fearfully as more utahraptors bellowed unseen from the forest.

There was a heavy *thump* as something landed on top of the vehicle. Bruno screamed and waved his arms as he ran, trying to alert the three *Leóns* gathered outside of the BRDM-2. The *citrinitas* utahraptor crouched upon the vehicle snapped its jaws over the head of the soldier gripping the side-hatch handle. The *León* howled as the utahraptor squeezed its jaws, crushing his skull inward. Bruno dove between the two surviving *Leóns* as they doubled-back from the *citrinitas* utahraptor. Xipetotec crashed into the *León* on Bruno's left, crushing the Cuban against the BRDM-2's armor plating. The *León's* beret flew off and the crown of his head crunched beneath the utahraptor's bulk.

The *citrinitas* utahraptor jumped onto the lone surviving *León* as Bruno threw open the BRDM-2's side hatch and climbed inside. The brain-damaged *León* outside groaned beneath Xipetotec as the utahraptor's malformed jaws pried his sternum open. The other *León* shrieked as the *citrinitas* utahraptor cleaved its talons through his abdomen. The Cuban soldier pounded at the golden utahraptor's black snout as its head ducked into his stomach. Bruno watched the soldier's entrails crawl out like worms and shut the door to the BRDM-2, stumbling back into his seat.

"Doctor Wynn," Zosimus grunted. "I think Xipetotec is back."

"Probably looking for revenge," Andrei groaned, sitting up on the gurney. He delicately touched the morphine drip connected to his trackmarked forearm and sat back with a weary sigh. "Ah, how I missed my mistress, madam morphine. You know, there's not much more we can ask for than to die without pain...especially out here." "They're just animals," Bruno muttered, moving to the driver's seat. "That's it, *hermano*, they're just animals...with diseases that may never be treated...but they're just animals. They're just hungry. They're going to eat *mis camaradas* and be sated, just like lions. Those utahraptors won't follow us any further. We'll just drive somewhere safe and...and...we'll just wait for an evac somewhere...somewhere safe...*santa muerte*..."

"Xipetotec is an old acquaintance of mine," Andrei drawled. He lifted his head from the gurney as the claws of the utahraptors raked across the APC's steel chassis. Several powerful feet slammed against the BRDM2 from all sides, rocking the vehicle on its shocks. Andrei licked his chapped lips and said, "These utahraptors...they are smarter than we could have ever imagined. They can remember human faces;

differentiate them. The utahraptor with the burns - Xipetotec - knows my face from my time in StalkerForce."

Andrei grinned dreamily at Zosimus as the BRDM-2 shuddered.

"Xipetotec knows your face, too," Andrei said. "He never forgets."

Zosimus looked to the cab and shouted, "*Camarada!* Untie me!"

Bruno stumbled out of the driver's seat and cut Zosimus loose.

"*Gracias,*" Zosimus muttered, rubbing his wrists. He withdrew his kukri from its sheath and cut the leather straps binding Andrei to the gurney. He took the tracking beacon out of his pocket and handed it to the heavily drugged scientist. Zosimus grabbed Bruno and pushed him back into the driver's seat of the BRDM-2.

"Drive, Bruno," Zosimus said. "Andrei; activate the tracking beacon and notify Vulture Squad to evac us. We don't have long."

Bruno buckled his seat belt as the cabin of the BRDM-2 was filled by the constant thudding of utahraptor feet, the screeching of their talons across steel, their muffled howls and shrieks of irritation. A powerful impact jarred the bulletproof windshield, splintering it; Bruno looked up and saw Xipetotec's mangled, bloody jaws only inches from the glass. Zosimus slapped Bruno on the shoulder and shouted, "*Arriba, Captain Moreno!*"

Bruno gunned the engine and the BRDM-2 lurched forward.

Xipetotec's ghastly white eyes streaked past the windshield as the utahraptor circled the vehicle, out of sight. Zosimus braced himself against a wall as the BRDM-2 bounced down the granite mountain path, back towards the savanna through the darkening jungle. Bruno was wide-eyed and trembling at the wheel, sweating as he steered. He glanced out of a side window and saw Xipetotec sprinting after them, flanked by an additional twenty *citrinitas* and *caudapavonis* utahraptors.

Bruno cried out, "Where do we go, bounty hunter?!"

"To hell," Andrei laughed, rubbing his arm. "Back to hell we go."

"Head to Panopolis," Zosimus shouted. "The old iron ore mine."

"Are you *loco*, bounty hunter?" Bruno snapped. He spun the steering wheel and the BRDM-2 careened around a tight bend in the granite road. A *citrinitas* utahraptor pounced over the vehicle and crashed into the tree-line of muchesa beyond the curving road. Bruno heard a *thud* from above as something landed on top of the BRDM-2. Xipetotec's crooked fangs drifted over the top of the windshield frame. Bruno glared into the utahraptor's milky cataracts and shouted to Zosimus, "Have you seen the size of the carnivores down in Panopolis? They're goliaths!"

"*Sim,*" Zosimus grunted. "Have faith in *Nyoho Ongongo.*"

"What the hell is *Nyoho-Ongongo*?" Andrei said.

"Our only hope," Zosimus answered grimly. "The Mother Gaia."

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO– NYOHO ONGONGO

A lone Huey Iroquois helicopternicknamed ‘the Father Vulture’ was flying south through the night towards Mount Chrysopoeia. Storm clouds washed over the dark shoulders of the mountain, pouring heavily into the jungle foothills below. Tendrils of lightning reached from the thunderclouds to the savanna, igniting acacia and baobab trees. Eli Taylor, Captain of Stalker Force, was sitting in the cockpit of the helicopter with the pilot, Ricardo Alvarez. Drops of rain spattered against the bubbled windshield as the northern savanna rushed like a dark current below. Eli spat tobacco juice on the floor as the helicopter raced towards the plateau’s edge.

“Hold on a sec, Ricky,” Eli said. “I see somethin’ up ahead.”

Eli narrowed his eyes, peering through the rain as the Father Vulture slowly leveled above the twisted remains of Stalker Force’s XR311. Lightning flared above the forest beyond the cliff of the plateau. The strobing flash briefly illuminated a pair of mangled legs clamped in the XR311’s turret ring. Eli choked on his chewing tobacco, whacking his chest with a fist. His boots tapped against the metal floor of the helicopter in a nervous rhythm.

Eli wiped the spitout of his moustache and said, “Alright, Ricky, that’s enough. I ain’t eaten since lunch and I ain’t lookin’ to lose what’s left of it. Keep flying south.”

“Aye-aye, Captain,” Ricardo said.

“I can’t believe Xavier and Andrei would get caught up in some shit like this,” Eli muttered, sitting back in his seat. “We should be back home right now, gettin’ our families out of the rubble and shit, y’know? I got family back in Kentucky, Ricky. You already know Washington D.C got bombed, and that’s only two states away.”

“I’m sure they’re safe,” Ricardo said. “Just pray on it, man.” “I ain’t like Miller,” Eli grunted, crossing his arms. “Not like that.” “Not much else we can do,” Ricardo said. “Out here, I mean.”

The Father Vulture dropped over the edge of the cliff and skimmed across the canopy of the miombo woodlands. Turbulent winds beat against the body of the helicopter as they flew towards Panopolis. The rotor blades chopped through the rain in a steady beat. Eli wiped the condensation from his side of the windshield and narrowed his eyes at the plains that surrounded the oasis. A bolt of lightning struck one of the baobabs on the savanna, engulfing the tree’s canopy in flame. The towering form of a giraffatitan was briefly lit by the fire as the animal turned away, fleeing to the safety of the southern jungle. Eli’s lower jaw fell open and tobacco juice ran down his hairy chin.

“Mother, have mercy,” Eli whispered. “I fucking hate dinosaurs.”

“That’s nothing,” Ricardo grunted. “Not compared to ‘Nam.”

Eli shuddered involuntarily. “Fuckin’ ‘raptors, man. And the Rex.”

Ricardo nodded in agreement; when he had evacuated Vulture Squad from their first encounter with the dinosaurs in Vietnam, a territorial tyrannosaurus rex had attacked the Father Vulture. Eli had almost been lost when the theropod took a bite of the helicopter's landing skid. Xavier and Andrei had formed Stalker Force after their mission in Vietnam, whereas Eli went on to become the leader of Vulture Squad. Eli had experienced horrors throughout his time in the Vietnam War; the Tet Offensive, the Battle of Hue, and Marine-led massacres; but the utahraptors trumped all of the other terrors that dominated his dreams. The worst was the Cyclops, an alpha utahraptor with a ka-bar stuck in its eye...

"No force on earth or heaven..." Eli muttered.

"Come again?" Ricardo said.

Eli hocked tobacco juice into a tin can.

"No force on earth or heaven could get me off this helicopter." "Ugly bastard," Andrei muttered. "Isn't he?"

Bruno was swearing and shivering as he drove the BRDM-2 through pitch-black jungle. Rain washed over their narrow windshield; it was nearly impossible to differentiate the dark granite road from the crowded rows of muchesa and tulip trees. Xipetotec's scarred face drifted down over the windshield frame. Zosimus stared at the cracked, charred fangs protruding from the utahraptor's frayed lips.

"Is there a turret on this?" Zosimus said. "Any weapons?"

"We were here to deliver vaccines," Bruno grunted. "Not to fight!"

"We're in a tin can on wheels," Andrei drawled. "Easy eatin'."

Zosimus took an AK-47 from a rack in the back and paced around the narrow cabin. The claws of Xipetotec and his packmates screeched across the steel-plated roof of the vehicle. Andrei laughed weakly as the BRDM-2 bucked violently on its shocks. He gently probed the IV line connected to his forearm and traced it back to a bag of morphine solution hanging overhead. Andrei gave the bag a squeeze and sighed, laying back on the bouncing gurney.

Andrei waved to Zosimus and said, "You - bounty hunter. If things get too bad, there's always an easier way out. Mother morphine provides a painless death."

Zosimus grabbed the IV line and ripped it out of Andrei's arm.

"See?" Andrei grinned. "I didn't even feel that, comrade."

Zosimus scowled and turned back to the cab. Bruno was muttering prayers in Spanish as he navigated the BRDM-2 out of the jungle, into the open plains of the savanna. The *citrinitas* utahraptors easily outpaced the lumbering vehicle, darting ahead to cut them off. Bruno growled and slammed down the gas pedal, steering directly towards the utahraptors ahead. There was a sound of rending metal from above, and rain fell onto Zosimus and Bruno's shoulders. Zosimus

looked up to the roof and saw Xipetotec's talons hooked around the roof hatch.

"*Irmão*," Zosimus grunted. "You said they couldn't open doors." Andrei shrugged, halfdazed. "I've been wrong before, comrade." The hatch was torn away from the roof of the BRDM-2 and rain poured heavily into the cab. Bruno spat and swore as he spun the steering wheel, driving straight into a *citrinitas* utahraptor. The animal shrieked as the vehicle's chain-wrapped tires ground its body to paste. Bruno laughed, slapping the wheel while Zosimus and Andrei screamed from behind him.

"Look out!" Zosimus shouted, raising his AK-47.

Xipetotec's disfigured snout lowered into the cab, snapping at Bruno's shoulder. The utahraptor's fangs ensnared Bruno's jacket and he was dragged away from the driver's seat. The BRDM-2 began to swerve away from Panopolis, into the western plains. Zosimus fired his AK-47 at Xipetotec and the utahraptor relinquished Bruno, withdrawing its head through the roof hatch.

Bruno fell back into his seat as the BRDM-2 rocked wildly across the savanna. Zosimus climbed onto Andrei's gurney and stuck his head out of the open hatch, into the cacophonous storm. Lightning flashed overhead and Zosimus saw Xipetotec crouched on top of the vehicle's roof. The utahraptor's milk-white eyes glistened with the reflected flames of burning baobab trees. Zosimus opened fire and the utahraptor leapt off of the vehicle to the ground below. Zosimus continued to shoot at Xipetotec until he noticed the other dozen utahraptors flanking the BRDM-2 on foot.

A blast of lightning revealed the dark body of the Father Vulture gliding through the storm above Panopolis. Zosimus ducked back into the cab of the BRDM-2 and knelt beside Andrei on the floor. Bruno was still fighting with the steering wheel, careening around immolated baobab and acacia trees. Two dozen utahraptors had come to surround the armored personnel carrier from every direction. It was impossible to see anything through the windshield other than the torrential rain, glowing with the light of the burning treetops.

"Slow down, Bruno," Zosimus said. "The Mother Gaia—"

The shape of a massive animal passed across the windshield; Bruno screamed and let go of the steering wheel, covering his face. A thick tail swung into the side of the BRDM-2, sending it rolling across the plain. Andrei and Bruno shrieked as they were thrown around the cabin; Zosimus merely grunted as he ricocheted from wall to wall. When the vehicle finally settled onto its side, all was silent within the cabin. Rain trickled down through the open side hatch and pattered inside of the vehicle. Zosimus heard the hiss of flames outside, fighting for life beneath the torrential downpour. Zosimus

remembered praying to *Nyoho Ongongo* for rain on the night that the village burned. He growled, rising up on his elbows.

The ground shuddered beneath the toppled vehicle.

Zosimus crawled to the open hatch and looked outside. Sheets of fire-lit water poured like magma over the pale body of the Mother Gaia carcharodontosaurus. The Mother Gaia's juvenile offspring, Prometheus, was crouched behind her immense form. Zosimus slowly inched back from the hatch as the Mother Gaia lowered her long snout to sniff the overturned vehicle. The golden stripes on the Mother Gaia's pallid hide seemed to glow like red-hot iron in Zosimus's post-hallucinatory state. He gripped the AK47 and sat back inside the cab beside Andrei and Bruno.

"Is she here?" Andrei whispered. "The Mother Gaia?"

"*Sim*," Zosimus exhaled. "But Xipetotec and the 'raptors aren't."

The Mother Gaia doubled-back from the BRDM-2 as a sharp screech cut through the thunder. She raised her head and growled lowly through her teeth. The Mother Gaia turned her large head in a slow arc, scanning the surrounding grassland for movement. Prometheus whimpered and cowered behind the Mother Gaia as yellow eyes began to alight from the darkness beyond the burning trees. Zosimus crept back towards the hatch and stopped; Xipetotec was standing a foot away from the opening.

The savanna became silent. Burning canopies hissed beneath the rain as Xipetotec bellowed at the carcharodontosaurus. The Mother Gaia stepped between her son and Xipetotec as thunder erupted overhead. Zosimus could hear the rotor blades of the Father Vulture approaching through the storm; Andrei and Bruno remained silent on the floor. Zosimus withdrew his machete with his left hand while holding the AK-47 in his right. He crawled to the front windshield and saw Xipetotec standing between the BRDM-2 and the Mother Gaia. Zosimus looked past the Mother Gaia and saw the rest of Xipetotec's colony; nearly twenty full grown male utahraptors were watching from just beyond the reach of the fire-light.

Xipetotec roared and the utahraptors charged, shrieking in unison.

The air was filled with the screams of the carnivores as the utahraptors pounced upon the carcharodontosaurus. The Mother Gaia howled as she staggered around the clearing with three *citrinitas* utahraptors clinging to her hips. The utahraptors hooked their forearm talons into the Mother Gaia's pelvis and kicked long wounds through her thighs. A utahraptor jumped onto the Mother Gaia's neck, but she twisted her head around and bit the utahraptor around its torso. The bitten utahraptor shrieked as it was thrown across the clearing. Zosimus watched as the animal struck a baobab and fell to the ground, its spine crumpled.

The Mother Gaia stomped her wide foot onto the back of another utahraptor, grinding the smaller animal against the savanna floor. Xipetotec jumped onto her snout and latched on with all of his talons. The Mother Gaia bellowed and swung her head through the rain, throwing off the alpha utahraptor. Xipetotec's claws dragged through the flesh of the Mother Gaia's face, leaving ragged lacerations along the length of her skull. Prometheus cowered behind his mother as the utahraptors circled them. Xipetotec slowly approached the carcharodontosaurus, licking the blood from his foreclaws. Zosimus backed away from the windshield and knelt beside Bruno and Andrei inside of the cabin. Andrei was placid with the remnants of morphine in his system. Bruno was trembling, wide-eyed and paralytic with fear. Zosimus gripped his machete as he listened to the storm outside. The rumbling roars of the Mother Gaia drowned the sounds of Xipetotec and the utahraptors. As far as Zosimus could hear, it was as if the entire colony had vanished. The distressed barks and whimpers from Prometheus eliminated that possibility in Zosimus's mind. "Doctor Wynn," Zosimus said. "Where is Vulture Squad?" "They'll be here," Andrei drawled. "Fashionably late as ever." "I heard their helicopter," Zosimus said. He crept back to the open hatch and peered outside. Flames crackled and sibilated from the upper branches of the baobabs in the grassy clearing. Zosimus saw a family of *chacma* baboons clinging to a blazing acacia tree; he assumed they preferred to be burned alive, rather than risk facing the utahraptors below. Xipetotec and fifteen of his pack-mates were standing in a circle around the Mother Gaia and Prometheus. The Mother Gaia was crouched low to the ground, wheezing as blood drained from her lacerated body.

A blinding web of lightning spread through the night sky and Xipetotec roared, prompting the utahraptors to charge. Zosimus ducked back inside as several *caudapavonis* utahraptors lunged over the BRDM-2. The Mother Gaia bellowed horrifically and thundered around the clearing while Zosimus hid in the shadows of the cabin. Bruno flinched beside him as the footsteps of the Mother Gaia rocked the vehicle. Zosimus pried open the gun cabinet and withdrew a pair of AKM assault rifles. He shoved a rifle into Bruno and Andrei's hands, but Andrei lacked the strength to hold his. The rifle dropped to the floor and Zosimus stooped to pick it back up.

"No need," Andrei drawled. "If it comes down to it, shoot me." "Typical," Zosimus grunted. He held his AK-47 and crawled back to the hatch, climbing halfway out into the rain. Zosimus peered around the front of the BRDM-2 and saw the Mother Gaia stumbling around the clearing with seven utahraptors clinging to her body. A few more utahraptors were flanking the Mother Gaia, biting and slashing their

talons at her ankles. Xipetotec stood with his back to Zosimus and the BRDM-2, silently watching as the utahraptors overpowered the carcharodontosaurus. The Mother Gaia bit a *caudapavonis* utahraptor on her chest by the throat and ripped its head off. The beheaded utahraptor still clung to the Mother Gaia's torso, its claws buried deep into her hide.

Xipetotec watched as the Mother Gaia circled towards him. Once the Mother Gaia passed, Xipetotec leapt onto the BRDM-2, then onto the back of the carcharodontosaurus. The Mother Gaia groaned and bucked her head back, trying to throw the utahraptor off to no avail. Xipetotec climbed up the Mother Gaia's neck to her head, then buried his talons into the carcharodontosaurus's eyes. The Mother Gaia howled in agony, spinning around the clearing in a desperate attempt to toss the utahraptors off. The rest of the utahraptors dog-piled on top of the Mother Gaia, rabidly biting and kicking until her blood flowed as plentifully as the rain.

Zosimus felt his body turn numb as he watched the Mother Gaia crash to the ground. The legs of the carcharodontosaurus broke like branches beneath its own body weight. The Mother Gaia howled weakly and kicked where she lay. Xipetotec and the utahraptors climbed over the Mother Gaia and tore through her musculature tissue, digging towards the vital organs. The Mother Gaia was still alive as the utahraptors carved a tunnel through her rib cage. The dying carcharodontosaurus raised her pale snout and uttered a bellowing death-rattle as her entrails were spilled to the earth. Zosimus felt his heart beating in his throat as he watched the butchery beneath the burning baobabs. Andrei climbed out beside him and watched for a few seconds in silence.

"It reminds me of dolphins and sharks," Andrei muttered. "Dolphins will brutally kill sharks that impede on their territory. I honestly didn't think the utahraptors would be willing – or able – to take down the Mother Gaia. If Vulture Squad doesn't get here in time, we might need to consider suicide."

"No suicides," Zosimus whispered. "We won't die as cowards."

"Speak for yourself, comrade," Andrei chuffed. "I will, either way."

Zosimus stared at the utahraptors as they fully disemboweled the Mother Gaia. A few of the *citrinitas* utahraptors had their entire upper bodies submerged within her bisected abdomen. Xipetotec dragged out the Mother Gaia's heart and threw it across the clearing, howling to the thunderclouds above. Everything was deafened beneath the monotonous rainfall. Zosimus looked from Xipetotec to the AK-47 in his hands. His eyes traced the tattoo on his forearm, the mask of a howling baboon staring back at him. Zosimus felt Andrei tugging on his shoulder, but he only heard the thunder. When Zosimus looked up,

Xipetotec was watching him from across the clearing.

"Hide, comrade," Andrei said. "Back into the car."

"I'm not afraid," Zosimus whispered. "I'm moving through."

Zosimus climbed on top of the BRDM-2 and opened fire on the utahraptors. A few of the animals instinctively ducked behind the Mother Gaia's carcass for cover. Prometheus, the subadult carcharodontosaurus, cowered behind the BRDM-2 as several *citrinitas* utahraptors rushed towards them. Zosimus screamed and held down the trigger of his AK-47, obliterating the skulls of three utahraptors in rapid succession. Nearly fifteen utahraptors were sprinting to the vehicle. Prometheus whimpered and barked from behind the bounty hunter. Zosimus ignored the orphaned dinosaur and continued firing, blasting apart the ankles and throats of four utahraptors.

Xipetotec pounced towards Zosimus but he dove aside, hit the ground, and rolled away. Another utahraptor lunged towards Zosimus and he raised the AK-47, firing several shots through the underside of the animal's throat. The utahraptor soared over his head and hit the ground, tumbling across the clearing. Zosimus scrambled to his feet and shot another charging utahraptor through the snout, blasting a hole through the back of its head. Another utahraptor snapped at Zosimus's backside and he swung the stock of the AK-47 like a club, whacking the carnivore on the nose. The utahraptor stumbled back, growling, and Zosimus opened fire, severing the animal's lower jaw from its skull.

A utahraptor bit Zosimus on the shoulder and threw him to the ground. Zosimus barked in pain and rolled across the wet grass as the utahraptor snapped at his feet. Zosimus dropped the AK-47 and withdrew his machete, swinging it blindly. The tip of the blade lacerated the utahraptor's jaw muscles and it staggered away, bellowing in pain. Zosimus jumped to his feet and thrust the kukri through the utahraptor's throat, opening its arteries and wind pipe. The dying utahraptor staggered towards Zosimus and he tackled it by the throat, pushing it into another charging utahraptor. Both animals hit the ground, entangled in each other's limbs. Zosimus grabbed the AK-47 and mulched the utahraptors' heads with lead until the magazine clicked empty. Xipetotec roared, and the rest of the utahraptors backed away from Zosimus.

Only ten utahraptors remained standing in the clearing. The fire sputtered and hissed as the rain extinguished the burning baobab and acacia trees. Xipetotec stood across from Zosimus in the darkness, barely lit by what remained of the dying flames. Zosimus stood upright, holding his kukri machete tight in hand. He remembered the sound of the same type of blade cleaving through his mother's neck, and he raised the kukri above his head with a savage roar. The *chacma*

baboons shrieked fearfully from their roosts in the acacia tree. Xipetotec spread his arms and roared, sprinting towards the bounty hunter.

Zosimus stood his ground, counting the seconds to impact.

Xipetotec lunged towards Zosimus, but the bounty hunter dove beneath the utahraptor and rolled to his feet behind it. He spun around just as Xipetotec pivoted towards him. Zosimus saw the utahraptor's jaws spreading wide over his head and swung out with the kukri, amputating Xipetotec's left forearm at the elbow. Xipetotec howled, snapping his jaws shut as the bounty hunter ducked around his swinging tail. Zosimus slashed his kukri through the back of the Xipetotec's calf and the utahraptor bellowed voraciously, spinning around. Zosimus was struck in the side of the head by Xipetotec's stiff tail and hit the ground hard.

Prometheus barreled through the ring of utahraptors and crashed into Xipetotec's side. Zosimus scrambled out of the way as the predators wrestled across the ground. The other utahraptors began to bark and shriek as they moved towards the fray. Zosimus crawled across the earth to the BRDM-2 and climbed back on top of the vehicle. The thumping of rotor blades reached a crescendo above the clearing as the Father Vulture broke through the low-hanging cloud cover. Floodlights poured onto the BRDM-2 and Zosimus waved his arms overhead, screaming "Help! Vulture Squad, help!"

The flood-lights skimmed across the clearing, illuminating the writhing bodies of Xipetotec, Prometheus and the circling utahraptors. Zosimus saw the cabin door of the Father Vulture open, and a rope ladder was dropped to the BRDM-2. Zosimus waved Bruno and Andrei out of the vehicle and onto the ladder. Up above in the Father Vulture, Eli was sitting in the gunner's seat with a mounted M2 Browning machine gun.

Eli opened fire on the utahraptors that were moving towards the BRDM-2 and the helicopter. Xipetotec and Prometheus stumbled into the side of the vehicle, knocking Zosimus off as Andrei and Bruno climbed the ladder.

"Comrade!" Andrei shouted. "Hold on!"

Zosimus covered his head as Prometheus trampled past. Xipetotec lunged towards the carcharodontosaurus, his remaining arm outstretched. Zosimus swung his machete and sliced it across the utahraptor's flank. Xipetotec shrieked in pain and turned towards Zosimus, but Prometheus tackled head-first into the utahraptor, biting the carnivore's shoulder. Xipetotec screamed and kicked Prometheus across the chest, spreading a long gash between his arms. Prometheus yelped in pain and dropped Xipetotec beside the bounty hunter. Xipetotec's jaws snapped over Zosimus's left forearm and he screamed

in agony. Zosimus stared down his bicep at the utahraptor's charred snout, only inches away. Xipetotec stared deeply into Zosimus's eyes, huffing lowly through its nostrils. Prometheus was standing a few feet away, panting and exhausted from his own injuries. The rest of Xipetotec's pack was scattered around the clearing, hiding from the Father Vulture and Eli's M2 Browning. Zosimus could hear Andrei yelling to him from above the BRDM-2, but no words formed within his mind. Zosimus simply stared into Xipetotec's eyes as the utahraptor's teeth ground through the tendons in his elbow.

Xipetotec's fangs stripped the flesh from Zosimus's forearm, exposing his bones to the rain. Zosimus screamed as his radius and ulna twisted through ragged tendons and ligaments. The baboon tattoo, as well as the rest of the musculature tissue, was peeled away in Xipetotec's jaws. Zosimus howled as Xipetotec bit through his radius and ulna.

Xipetotec wrenched the bones from their sockets and Zosimus fell back against the bloodsoaked soil. The stump at the end of the bounty hunter's bicep pumped vibrant red blood where he lay dying.

Prometheus pounced onto Xipetotec from behind, crushing the utahraptor's spine beneath his heavy feet. The young carcharodontosaurus bit down on the top of Xipetotec's head and tore the upper part of the skull away from the rest of the head and neck. Prometheus threw aside Xipetotec's severed head and howled at the rest of the utahraptors, driving the creatures further back into the shadows. The colony fled from the clearing as Prometheus stumbled over to the Mother Gaia's corpse. The last thing that Zosimus saw was the young carcharodontosaurus lying to rest beside his dead mother. Zosimus's only regret was that he hadn't done the same for his own.

"Cyka blyat," Andrei muttered, climbing down the BRDM -2. The morphine made Andrei's legs bow uselessly and he fell face-first in a puddle of Xipetotec's blood. Andrei groaned and pushed himself upright, crawling towards Zosimus's prone body. He grabbed the AK-47 and put a new magazine into the rifle. Andrei shot the AK-47 into the darkness, drawing a blind line of fire around the perimeter to ward off any remaining utahraptors. Prometheus barked from across the clearing, but otherwise didn't react. Andrei waved his arms over his head as the Father Vulture descended.

The Father Vulture settled down beside the BRDM-2 and Eli waved Andrei over. Bruno helped Andrei to carry Zosimus's body into the craft and they laid him across a gurney. As the helicopter lifted off of the ground, Andrei collapsed to the metal floor, a hand over his wounded shoulder. Eli hoisted the M2 Browning back inside of the cabin and slid the cabin door shut. He pulled Andrei up and dropped him into a seat beside Bruno.

Eli grinned down at Andrei. "Doctor Livingstone, I presume?" "Doctor Wynn," Andrei grunted. "You drunk hick."

Vulture Squad's onboard medic tied a tourniquet around Zosimus's

mutilated left arm, then switched to compressions. Andrei sat upright and blinked at Zosimus's beaten, bloodied body. The only sounds inside of the Father Vulture were the unending rain and thunder. Bruno stared out through the window as the helicopter lifted above the savanna, circling north. Andrei looked to the medic and said, "How is he, comrade? Is he okay?"

"Far from it," the Vulture Squad medic grunted. "He's dead."

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE – UNUS MUNDUS

Immeasurable aeons passed as Zosimus drifted through death. The searing pain of electricity jolted Zosimus back to reality with a

scream of agony. He thrust his right arm out and shoved the medic that had used the defibrillator on him. Zosimus blinked rapidly and saw that he was strapped to a gurney inside of the Father Vulture. He looked down to his baboon tattoo and saw that it was gone; his left arm now terminated in a stump at the elbow. IV lines were woven into the gauze that covered the amputated joint, feeding it blood from a bag over the bounty hunter's head. Zosimus sighed and laid back on the gurney. After a few seconds, a smile creased his face and he began to cry.

"Easy," Andrei said. "Relax, comrade. You're safe now." "And alive," Eli drawled. "Did y'see anything interestin'?" Zosimus coughed. "What do you mean?"

"Well...you were dead for five minutes," Eli said, stroking his

handlebar moustache. "Our medic, Corporal Tembo, cauterized that missing arm of yer's and hooked yaup'ta some of them blood bags. Took a few tries with the electric paddles to get yer heart goin' again. Did y'see anything interesting? I had some near death experiences during the Battle of Hue City, backin 'Nam. But I never saw nothin' flashy or interestin', no lifeflashin' before my eyes or nothin' like that. What about you?"

Zosimus nodded wearily. He gripped the arm that had been torn in half, tenderly squeezing what remained of his bicep. A thread of morphine was connected to a vein just above the stump; he was grateful he could scarcely feel the fresh injury. He couldn't remember how his battle with Xipetotec had ended, but a singular image had

been cemented within his mind. Zosimus smiled and started to laugh as Eli, Andrei and Bruno watched him expectantly.

“Well?” Eli said. “Where’d ya go, bounty hunter? What’d ya see?” “My mother,” Zosimus said, inhaling deeply. “I saw her face.” “She dead?” Eli asked. “Did she get eaten by a ‘raptor?’” Andrei gave Eli a cutting look, but he merely shrugged in return. “Not exactly,” Zosimus sighed. “When I was a child, she was

murdered by thugs that had used the revolution as a cover for theft and violence; revenge and anarchy. These men followed my mother and I to Mount Chrysopoeia, searching for gold. According to Doctor Wynn, it was actually uranium. Something worthless to us *Onjoi* and *Ovimbundu*, but these men took advantage of my mother; they raped and murdered her. They never found the uranium, what they had thought was gold. I had dreams and nightmares of my mother, but I couldn’t remember her face. Not since...not after...”

Zosimus’s voice caught in his throat. He swallowed hoarsely. “They beheaded her,” Zosimus said. “I had forgotten her face.” Bruno crossed his arms and leaned back in his seat.

“It is common, *hermano*. In psychology, we call it *repression*.” “What, are you some psychic or something?” Eli drawled. “A psychoanalyst, actually,” Bruno said. “Before the military.” Zosimus sat upright in the gurney and swayed drunkenly; the

morphine was a stronger high than the bounty hunter was used to. He cradled his amputated arm and turned to face Bruno. “There was a man in Stalker Force; his name was Molnar. He had once spoken of psychoanalysis. *Meu irmão*, Josef, also spoke of the same type of psychology. A man named ‘Gustav Jung’, or something like that. Do you know of him?”

“*Si, hermano*,” Bruno nodded. “Carl Gustav Jung was my hero.” “That’s him,” Zosimus said. “He spoke of ‘persona’ and ‘ego’.” “The path of individuation,” Bruno said. “The layers of the mind.” “Tell me more,” Zosimus said, leaning forward. “I want to know.” “I wouldn’t anticipate discussing Jungian psychology to a man that just came back from death after fighting off dinosaurs with a machete,” Bruno said, shrugging. “But I’ll entertain you, *hermano*. Carl Jung was a psychologist that developed a sort of ‘map’ for the human mind. The outer most layers being the conscious mind, and the inner levels being the unconscious— the things that only appear in your subconscious actions, or manifest within your dreams.”

Zosimus nodded. He remembered the screams of burning baboons. "The outermost layer is the persona," Bruno said. "The persona is the mask; the character you choose to play in life. An Ovimbundu man; an *Onjoi* tribesman; a soldier; bounty hunter; warrior. These are all personas that you choose to don within this life. Beneath this mask is the ego, the

internal stream of conscious thought. Everything within your mind that you are consciously aware of is a part of your ego."

"Keep going," Zosimus said. "Deeper, *irmão*."

"Very well," Bruno grunted. "Within the ego is the subconscious. Multiple archetypes inhabit the subconscious. These include the 'Shadow', and the 'Anima', for men. For women, they have what we call an 'Animus'. The shadow is the personification of every negative thing repressed within yourself. All of your most negative characteristics, typically dictated by survival instincts, make up the Shadow. For you, your shadow may be personified through"

"A leopard," Zosimus said. "The *Onjoicall* the shadow '*ondele*'."

Bruno raised his eyebrows. "Very well, *hermano*. Now, the Shadow within every being cannot be extinguished. It is malleable; it changes and grows with the individual. Everybody works through their Shadow differently. Some will ignore the Shadow; they will repress it, or only see it within the hearts of other men. The wise man must see his own shadow, and confront it head-on, just as you confronted the utahraptor Xipetotec. It is from working through the Shadow that you integrate it, *hermano*. Otherwise, it can filter through your ego and come to possess it fully."

"Like Pardus," Zosimus grunted. "A panther."

"Pardus was the saboteur," Andrei said to Bruno. "A double- agent."

Bruno nodded as he continued to stare at Zosimus. "Understood. So, *hermano*, you must work through the Shadow in order to find your Anima. The Anima is the subconscious archetype of your feminine self. The easiest way to find your Anima is through rediscovering your inner child, seeing the world as you saw it before you were forced to develop a shadow. The Anima is typically nurtured by your mother, or your aunts or sisters, or elder women within your community..."

"Elephants," Zosimus whispered. "My anima was, in my dreams."

"It's possible," Bruno said. "The subconscious archetypes of the mind often take the shapes of symbolic avatars within our dreams. Carl Jung first developed these theories by investigating the dreams and spiritual beliefs of different cultures around the earth. He found that no matter where he went, the same symbols and archetypes would appear in spiritual practices, artwork, and in dreams. When you encounter your Anima in your dreams, 'she' may take the form of

elephants, or your Shadow may take the shape of these ‘baboons’ and ‘leopards’ and ‘panthers’ you speak of.”

“I’m sorry, but what’s this matter?” Eli drawled. He spat tobacco juice onto the floor and crossed his Ithaca shotgun across his lap. “I ain’t never spoken to a pinko commie for any longer’n it takes to pull a trigger, and this is some neat talk and all, but y’know the world is on fire, right? The fuckin’ U-S-of-A is currently a pile of ash and rock, and so’s Cuba. Who gives a shit about some Africandreams?”

Bruno grinned. “Well, *guero*, this is the truly interesting part. The path of individuation and these layers of the human mind can be applied to any civilization or society. Every community has its shadow; each motherland possesses its own collective ego; any nation bears the mask of a persona. We can especially see this in the United States, your motherland. She wears a mask that speaks of freedom and equality, yet her shadow holds the weapons of war and subjugation. If Zosimus were born in your country a couple hundred years ago, he may have been a slave.”

Zosimus rubbed the scraggly beard forming on his face. “In my tribe, the *Onjoi*, we believe that the earth itself is imbued with a spirit. We call her *Nyoho Ongongo*; Mother Nature, or Mother Earth. Every living thing is a part of *Nyoho Ongongo*, and the souls of every living thing are parts of our Father God, *Suku*. In that sense, I can say that I am a manifestation of both my mother *Nyoho Ongongo* and my father *Suku*.” “Anima Mundi,” Bruno said. “The World Soul.”

“World soul?” Eli repeated. “You ever been to Woodstock, man?”

Andrei rolled his eyes. “Pass the morphine, Zosimus.”

Bruno ignored them both and said to Zosimus, “You see, *hermano*, Carl Jung once spoke of something similar to your ‘*Nyoho Ongongo*’, this ‘Mother Gaia’ concept from mythology. He called it Anima Mundi – the soul of the earth itself. If we were to say that this ‘Anima Mundi’ is a feminine, maternal spirit, then we could say that she has an Animus instead of an Anima. The woman’s Animus is the inverse of the man’s Anima – it is the woman’s subconscious masculine attribute. The animus is manifested through different archetypes, over various stages.”

“Really?” Eli grunted. “Earth psychology? Fuckin’ hippies, man.”

“The Animus, as well as the Anima, must be individuated,” Bruno continued, staring at Zosimus. “The first phase of the Animus is the archetypal man of power; the men that shape the earth through their force and might. Soldiers; farmers; laborers; warriors; et cetera. Beyond that is the archetypal man of adventure, then the man of knowledge, and finally man as shaman; when man is finally one with the *Anima Mundi* in understanding, empathy and comprehension.” Eli yawned. “Keep talkin’, commie. It’s a long flight to Kuito.”

“Si,” Bruno said. “Now, this is what I personally think...we, ourselves, are the Animus of this Anima Mundi; Mother Gaia; *Nyoho Ongongo*. We are the masculine subconscious archetypes of the earth, just as the animals of this earth are. Take Zosimus, for example; he is what you could call the ‘integrated’ animus. Through the integration of the Animus into the conscious mind, the self becomes whole. Zosimus is a perfect example of the individuated, integrated animus of Anima Mundi.”

“What about the war?” Eli grunted. “What about the rest of us?”

“The displaced Animus,” Bruno sighed, rubbing his brow wearily. “We are the displaced Animus of the Anima Mundi, the earth itself. When a woman displaces, rejects, or represses her Animus, it becomes an engine of destruction. You could say that our motherlands...our militaries...all of this violence, it is the displacement of the earth’s animus. It is the ultimate destruction of mankind, and potentially all of life on earth, if the superpowers resort to using radioactive weapons when they run out of antimatter bombs. There is nothing we can do, other than heal our Anima Mundi and her Animus. Perhaps her Ego will retain us, rather than purge us.”

“I doubt it,” Andrei muttered. “But I’ve been wrong before.”

“Shit,” Eli said. “I’d say earth’s Animus just committed suicide.”

“It is all a part of the process,” Bruno sighed. “The cycle is eternal.”

The men were silent for a moment. Zosimus stared out through the window, into the storm as the savanna swept by below as a grey blur. Zosimus thought of his battle with Pardus, and he remembered what the mercenary had said about encountering the *Onjoi* tribe. Zosimus immediately straightened up on the gurney, tore the IV lines out of his arm, and reclaimed his bloody kukri machete from the floor. He remembered the swinging blades that beheaded his mother, but he wasn’t afraid of the memories anymore. He could finally envision her face; it was all he had wanted for over a decade. Now, he wanted even more.

“Take me to my people,” Zosimus said to Eli. “The *Onjoivillage*.”

“Awn-joy?” Eli repeated. “That the one on Mount Chrysopoeia?”

“*Sim*,” Zosimus said, nodding. Eli stared until he said, “Yes, sir.”

“Fair enough,” Eli said. He rose to enter the cockpit, but he halted and looked back to the bounty hunter. “You sure you wanna go back? I know America ain’t really appealin’, on account of us being at the start of a third World War, but we could use all the help we can get. According to our surviving officers back on Cheyenne Mountain, there’s a lot of these colliders openin’ up wormholes with dinosaurs pourin’ out. We could use somebody like you when we go and investigate with Doctor Wynn.”

“Excuse me?” Andrei said. “I’m doing *what*?”

"Investigatin' every damned collider on earth," Eli drawled.
"Can I help?" Bruno asked, looking at Eli. "It may be desertion, but if I can help, I will. No point letting my country collapse in vain, s?"
"Sorry," Eli smirked. "Only enough room for one commie."
"Silence, redneck," Andrei groaned. "I'm an anarcho-primitivist."
Eli rolled his eyes and said, "Well what'a y'know, looks like we've got room for another commie after all. Since this isn't a political situation, but a whole greater-humanity-issue..."
"I'll take it," Bruno sighed. "*Hasta la vista, Cuba.* I'll miss you."
"So what about you, bounty hunter?" Eli asked. "Coming home?" "I know myhome," Zosimus said. He leaned against the door and tapped his finger against the window, at the forests below. "Down there."
"Really?" Eli asked. He glanced out the window, at the treetops flowing like a radiant green river beneath them. "You seem a little... civilized...for a native..."

Zosimus raised an eyebrow and motioned at his filthy, mud-stained torso. Most of the cuts he had sustained were stitched together, creating a lattice-work pattern across his abdomen. His boots were gone and his pantlegs were torn from the knee-down. His bare feet were bruised and bloodied. Eli curled his lip and nodded as he looked the bounty hunter up and down.

"Point taken," Elisaid. "Where are we setting you down?"
Zosimus looked out the window, scanning the rolling hills of rainforest below. He tried to find a clearing cut from the tree tops, but he couldn't spot any. He felt a brief flare of panic when he noticed a column of smoke rising from an open clearing beneath Mount Chrysopoeia. Zosimus urgently tapped his finger against the glass, looking over his shoulder at Eli.

"There," Zosimus said. "Hurry!"

"Alright, alright," Eli said, clambering out of his seat. He went to the cockpit and shouted, "Ricardo, head to 3 o'clock - AM, not PM, jackass. See that smoke? Set us down there. We're dropping off the local."

The helicopter turned in the air, flying to the pyre of smoke.

It took ten minutes to reach the village.

Zosimus was gripped by dread during the duration of their journey to the rising smoke. He could clearly see the burning village in the back of his mind, and he imagined the same horrors being wrought to the *Onjoi* tribe. Zosimus practically bounced on his heels as the helicopter approached the clearing, circling the village.

Zosimus let out a heavy breath. The village was fine; they were cooking the body of a dead pachycephalosaurus above a fire in the center of the clearing. The men of the village were dancing around the

flames, whooping with joy and pounding on djembe drums. The red berry-stained strips of cloth that were tied around the biceps of the men caught the full light of the fire, making them glow like polished rings of ruby.

When the villagers saw the helicopter, the women, children, and elderly ducked for cover within their adobe shelters. The men remained by the fire, aiming their spears at the hovering craft. The Father Vulture settled down at the base of the hill that the village had been built upon, whipping the surrounding grass into a frenzy of licking green blades.

Zosimus pulled open the door, and the full sound of the helicopter's engine struck him like an axe. The sound was disorienting, and he had to put a hand in front of his face to shield himself from the rain being swept into a cyclone by the rotor blades. Eli stood in the doorway as Zosimus hopped down into the field. The *Onjoi* tribesmen saw their prodigal son and shouted joyously, sprinting across the clearing to the helicopter. They kept a safe distance from the roaring rotor blades, aiming their spears at the foreigners within.

"These kids ain't never seen what an Ithaca could do," Eli grunted, bemused. He raised the tally-marked shotgun to his lips and kissed the barrel. Andrei coughed from the seat behind him.

"Gross," Andrei said. "You kiss your sister with that mouth?"

Eli grinned. "At least I got a lady to kiss."

"*Touché*," Andrei grunted. "Nice to see you've kept your charm."

Eli turned back to the open doorway, looking down at Zosimus. The beaten and bloodied bounty hunter was standing with his back to the helicopter, cradling his amputated bicep. He suddenly seemed unsure of what to do, seeing his ancestral hilltop painted in the emerging red light of dawn. Eli cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, "Yo, Zosimus! What are you waiting for?"

Zosimus shook his head, smiling wearily at Andrei, Eli, and Bruno. He looked up to see his father, Sophos Patéras, coming down the hillside with a spear in his left hand. The other warriors surrounded him, their spears and shields forming a protective ring like the bony crests of the maternal pachyrhinosaurus defending their young.

Zosimus raised a hand to the men inside of the helicopter.

"Take care of Dr. Wynn," Zosimus said. "I'm home."

Eli watched as Zosimus turned back to the village and walked into the open arms of his father. The warriors cheered around Zosimus and hefted him high into the air, singing and laughing. Eli smiled and pulled the cabin door shut. The early morning sunlight illuminated the dust clinging to the windows, painting the translucent pane into shimmering ochre. Eli couldn't see Zosimus as the helicopter lifted above the tree tops, flying back towards Kuito.

“He’s a good kid,” Bruno grunted. He bit his lip as the medic worked a needle through the flesh of his shoulder. “He’ll be alright, as the integrated Animus of his Anima Mundi; Mother Gaia; *Nyoho Ongongo*.” “He’ll be better off than us,” Eli sighed. He sat back down beside Andrei and kicked his feet up on a rucksack. “Colombia; Singapore; Ukraine; Mexico; Canada...there’s too many places to count. We’ve got a lot of work to do, and not enough help to get it all done.” “It’s hopeless,” Andrei mumbled. “This isn’t our world anymore.” “Not if I can help it,” Eli said. “Those Russians bombed all of the breweries on the east coast. Moscow’s gone, and I don’t think there’re any ruskies left to fight, but we can still keep the dinosaurs from eating all of the future distillers and brewmasters.” “Whatever’s worth fighting for,” Bruno said. “Just not for fear.” “Never for fear,” Eli agreed. “Only for others.” “I know where we have to go,” Andrei muttered. “Isla Olympus.” The men listened to Andrei as they flew north, into the tempest

ANIMUS INDIVIDUATION PHASE VI INTEGRATION

“Through the Individuation of the Animus, one may become whole. If the

Earth possessed its own Integrated Animus, we may see this archetype as a modern messiah. I dream of a world in which we are each the Integrated Animus of the earth, serving as its spiritual saviors.”

– Dr. Bruno Moreno

“The real mystery does not behave mysteriously or secretively; it speaks a secret language, it adumbrates itself by a variety of images which all indicate its true nature. It is known only through vague hints but essentially unknown.”

– Carl G. Jung

“I am sorry for only two things. These two things are: I am sorry that I have mistreated some few animals in my lifetime, and I am sorry that I am unable to murder the whole damned human race.”

– Carl Panzram

“Perhaps we are on our own, without a higher power. I am unsure if that is more frightening than the idea that we must hold the power to make ourselves our own. We have nothing left but each other, but maybe it will be enough...”

– Captain Bruno Moreno

EPILOGUE– SWORDS TO PLOWSHARES

New Fátima Region, shortly afterward.

The remains of the village on the savanna were smoldering beneath the sun. Crimson light glowed across the melted bodies of the adobe

shelters, and white ash bleached the sandy clearing. The corpses of the villagers that the utahraptors hadn't taken were still lying curled in their original positions at death. Zosimus held his machete in his remaining hand, fighting back tears as he breathed in the harsh aroma of scorched flesh, seared body fat, and immolated hair. He let go of his breath, choking, and felt a hand on his shoulder.

"No fear," Sophos Patéras said, patting his son's back. "Be strong."

Zosimus nodded, and they set about their ritual.

The *Onjoi* tribesmen began to dig shallow graves with machetes that they had pilfered from the burnt village. The dried soil was hard to work through, and the men were often forced to scoop handfuls of sand on their hands and knees. They worked without speaking until Sophos began to sing a tribal song; a prayer to their ancestors to relinquish the souls of the charred bodies. His song beckoned *Nyoho Ongongo* to set the spirits of the deceased villagers free, so they could return to *Suku* in the life beyond his dreams.

Zosimus couldn't help but cry.

The last time Zosimus had seen burnt bodies, it had been on his final mission with the Portuguese *Cacadores Especias*. They had been raiding villages in search of militia leaders, but after a decade of fighting, the soldiers had lost their sense of humanity. Zosimus hadn't protested when they beheaded their suspected Ovimbundu enemies, mounting the decapitated heads on pikes as a warning to future dissenters.

Zosimus knelt at the feet of a burnt villager as his father stood at the head. The body was genderless; a twisted black shape contorted around a melted ceramic vase. Zosimus wondered if this villager had been a mother bringing water to douse a child, or an elder attempting to fight the flames of the inferno. It didn't matter anymore; everybody was equal upon the baptism of fire. Zosimus had built prosthetic arms for himself and his father using reclaimed rebar and the leather-bound bones of the utahraptors he had slain. Where Zosimus once bore the tattoo of a baboon, he now possessed the forearm and talons of the alpha male utahraptor, Xipetotec. Zosimus looked from the corpse to Sophos. "I'm ready, father." "So be it," Sophos whispered, grasping the body's shoulders. The flesh of the ankles crackled beneath Zosimus's fingers. When he lifted the body with his father, the flesh stripped clean from the bone, revealing rosy flesh and pale bone beneath.

Zosimus almost lost his grip as bile surged up in his gut, but he caught Sophos's stern gaze and swallowed it back. They carefully lifted the body, looking away from the head lolling back, the lower jaw falling open to reveal a collection of maggots where the tongue had once been.

They sang remorsefully as the body was lowered into the earth. The heat and the odor made the labor arduous, but they wiped the soot

and sweat from their skin and pressed on. Over the course of a few hours, they managed to dig graves for each body. As they worked, a herd of maiasaura milled through the scorched turf of the savanna in search of food. The fire that had spread through the plains had rendered most of the vegetation inedible, but the infants waddling around the feet of their mothers managed to find scraps of salvageable loudetia grass to eat. Once the work was done, Zosimus leaned back from the row of graves and wiped away the ash caked to his sweaty forehead. The warriors of the tribe sang their low-pitched songs of mourning as they tossed freshpicked flowers with fire-red petals onto the cindered bodies of the dead. Sophos raised his spear and uttered a prayer to the heavens, praising *Nyoho Ongongo* for the lives that she had once provided to the deceased. Zosimus had last heard the prayers when his mother had died; he had to turn away from the graves to mask his childish shame.

Zosimus carried his machete as he walked through the remnants of the village. He could still feel the fear that coursed through his marrow when he had been a soldier examining such shelters with the Portuguese. There was always the paranoia of a guerrilla lying in wait with a blade or a rifle, and that fear had led many soldiers to lay down the lives of countless innocent people. Zosimus felt a sickening slew of self-loathing guilt as he wrestled with his own waning anxieties. There was nobody left in the village for him to be afraid of; only ghosts remained within the ruins. The ground crunched beneath Zosimus's bare feet as he paced down the narrow row of huts. The groans of the maiasaura created a bassy undercurrent to the baritone songs of the warriors in mourning. Zosimus could feel the eyes of his father on his back, but he ignored the shame it brought him. Sophos had seen Zosimus cry enough as a child; he couldn't bear to show his father any more of what lay beneath his scarred mortal shell.

Zosimus kept his eyes on the ground as he walked to the collapsed longhouse at the western end of the village.

Zosimus searched through the remaining crates scattered around the wreckage until he found what he was looking for; the Cuban DM-10 vaccines. Zosimus called over a few of the *Onjoi* tribesmen, instructing them to take the crates of syringes to the village. He waited until all the crates had been taken away, and then turned when he heard some of the tribesmen calling out for help in Umbundu.

"Ondele! Esuvi, ekandu!"

Zosimus recognized the words being shouted from across the village; demon, soul taker, evil. He sprinted across the scorched earth and saw a few of the *Onjoi* warriors pointing their spears at the juvenile carcharodontosaurus, Prometheus, still crouched beside the Mother Gaia. Prometheus was howling and barking at several utahraptors that

were dragging away Xipetotec's body. Zosimus watched as the utahraptors pulled the body into the forest, where they covered the carcass with fern fronds and palm plants.

Zosimus didn't understand what the utahraptors were doing; to him, it looked like they were burying their deceased Alpha. After being chased by Stalker Force from Asia to Africa, the utahraptors had developed an understanding that they were being hunted. Xipetotec had been the first utahraptor to bury another, to conceal their trail. After witnessing the actions of their alpha, the utahraptors had carried the ritualistic practice throughout each subsequent generation. Zosimus turned away from the utahraptors that were burying Xipetotec and looked to the

carcharodontosaurus, still crouched beside his decaying mother.

Prometheus cocked his head at Zosimus, whimpering fearfully.

Zosimus raised his machete. "You must let her go, *meu irmão*."

Prometheus hissed lowly at the bounty hunter and started to back away from the Mother Gaia. The carcharodontosaurus reluctantly rose from the blood-stained sand as Zosimus approached. Zosimus swung his machete at Prometheus, driving the predator away from the village, towards Panopolis. Zosimus felt a small pang of guilt; he could understand what the carcharodontosaurus may have felt. If what Bruno had said was true, Prometheus was no different from the bounty hunter. Zosimus believed both he and Prometheus were twin branches of *Nyoho Ongongo's* animus. Zosimus hoped his new *irmão* wouldn't become the next Goliath. Zosimus watched the young carcharodontosaurus until it was a mere speck on the northern horizon. He walked past Sophos and the *Onjoi* funerary rites, back into the village. Zosimus had heard from some of the *Onjoi* warriors that the city of Kuito had already fallen in the days following his return to the tribe. The rebel militias within Angola were already expunging what Portuguese remained, ethnically cleansing the European colonists that had become disconnected from their antimatter-bombed motherland. Zosimus knew it was only a matter of time until the rebels returned to New Fátima for its fictitious gold...

Zosimus walked past one of the adobe shelters and stopped.

Something was rustling within the clay crucible.

Zosimus turned to the shelter, his machete raised to strike. A small figure crawled out from the half-melted hut. Zosimus felt a flare of panic upon seeing the hunched shape, barely higher than his knee. The little being was covered in a second skin of pale soot, but Zosimus could see the black flesh beneath. The ashen life-form's eyes opened wide, revealing the pale orbs Zosimus had seen in his own reflection as a child. The fear relinquished its grip on Zosimus's heart and he lowered the machete.

The Ovimbundu child watched Zosimus warily, staring at him with the thousand-yard gaze of a soldier after a decade-long war. Zosimus sheathed the machete on his hip and looked to his father across the clearing. Sophos was still singing his hymns to *Suku* and *Nyoho Ongongo* as the warriors shoveled dirt onto the flower-bathed bodies of the dead. Zosimus turned back to the young boy and saw three more children cowering at the mouth of the shelter; another boy and two girls, no older than five or six years old each.

Zosimus opened his mouth to speak, but no words would come. The children ran out and clambered around Zosimus, begging in the Umbundu language. Zosimus recoiled at first, flinching as they clung to his legs, but he let go of his breath and attempted to quell his rising adrenaline. He reached down and stroked their hair, allowing them to wipe their tears against his tattered pant-legs.

"It's okay," Zosimus mumbled. "You're safe."

Zosimus looked up sharply as the utahraptors in mourning howled over Xipetotec's foliage-swathed carcass. Zosimus tried to see the predators in the brush, but they had seemingly vanished. Instead he saw infant maiasaura, squealing and dancing around their mother's feet. He listened to Sophos's burial songs sifting through the smoky haze, and the shoveling of machetes crackling across the clearing. Zosimus knelt before the children and accepted their embrace, whispering to them in Umbundu as they cried against the stitches laced over his heart.

"Don't be afraid," Zosimus whispered. "Move through your fear."

"What I wrote and told you, and with the picture I made for you...I gave you what you need to know, and this should be enough for you..."

– Zosimus Alchemista

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Much love and many blessings - Ethan, the Author